

1962

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Recommended Citation

Hugo, Howard E.. "Beachhead by Schooner in the SolomonsL The Second Allied Invasion of Choiseul." *New Mexico Quarterly* 32, 3 (1962). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol32/iss3/5>

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Howard E. Hugo

BEACHHEAD BY SCHOONER IN THE SOLOMONS: THE SECOND ALLIED INVASION OF CHOISEUL

Choiseul Island lies between Bougainville and Santa Isabel Island in the Solomons. For the reader whose orientation is based on Guadalcanal, the southeast corner of Choiseul is one hundred and eighty miles from Cape Esperance, the northwest tip of that famous island. The topography of Choiseul is like that of any member of the Solomon group. Its ninety-by-twenty mile area is a mountainous interior rising to three thousand feet. The high lands gradually slope off in a series of jungle-covered escarpments to sandy beaches and coral cliffs that outline a long, irregular perimeter. A barrier reef runs parallel to the northern coast. The southern shoreline contains innumerable coves, bays, and islets.

Except for a token landing by Marine Raiders, executed as diversion during the Bougainville attack in October, 1943, the island saw little of the South Pacific War. It suffered from the hostile presence of several hundred Japanese: remnants of the Munda, Kolombangara, Vella Lavella garrisons, refugees who had fled in barges to Choiseul after New Georgia fell to the Americans. Most of the boats were strafed and sunk. The survivors encamped in scattered groups on the island's southern edge. By spring, 1944, the Japanese moved in separate parties along the beaches to the deserted Australian plantations at Cape Alexander, northeast point of the island. There they dug in, protected from attack by the encompassing land about Choiseul Bay. Perhaps they hoped to join their compatriots on Bougainville and in the Shortland Islands, from which Choiseul was parted by thirty miles of open sea. We heard rumors that the isolated camp was supplied by submarines.

Dozens of villages line the southern beaches which the Japanese occupied. The Melanesian inhabitants took to the mountainous

interior. Occasionally a daring group paddled from Choiseul to the British Commissioner's headquarters at Munda, New Georgia, to bring meager information. By July, 1944, Major W. F. Martin Clemens—the Commissioner—decided to sail to the island. The mission was two-fold: military reconnaissance and native morale-building. The dislocation of saltwater people to the jungle was harmful to the health of the natives. Major Clemens was anxious to console his uneasy charges. Thus we undertook "The Second Allied Invasion of Choiseul."

I was stationed at Munda, New Georgia, skipper of a small American naval vessel. One evening over several bottles of New Zealand ale Clemens discussed his plans. My duties were not pressing, and I volunteered to accompany him. After more ale, I was solemnly appointed liaison officer between British and American forces, sailing master, and executive-navigation-communication-gunnery officer. Our invasion fleet was the ex-copra schooner *B. F. Jones*, which was built in the Islands twenty years before.

I examined the *Jones* the next day. She possessed neither the practicality of our Navy's landing ships—LST's, LSM's, etc.—nor did she have the appearance of a trim fighting vessel. But the *Jones* had charm to a sailor's eye: a pretty ship of fifty-five feet overall; black with gray cabin-houses, black spars; a long bowsprit extending from a handsome clipper bow, an elegantly-carved handrail around her poop deck. Her topmasts had disappeared. The only sails were a tattered foresail and forestaysail. The main boom served as support for a wooden canopy over the after part of the ship. Chief propulsion was a "semi-Diesel"—an obsolete contraption, started by gasoline. This pushed the *Jones* at exactly five and six-tenths knots.

The wooden roof was to shelter Major Clemens and myself. The rest of the vessel to the foremast was rigged with a canvas awning. The *Jones* ordinarily carried a complement of six natives. We planned also to take the Major's clerk, Willie Paia, and eight members of the Solomon Island Defense Forces. These, headed by Sergeant Gumu, were veterans with Clemens of the Guadalcanal and New Georgia fighting.

We originally intended to carry a Lewis gun and one thirty-caliber machine gun. A native scout paddling from Choiseul brought news that the enemy still ran two barges. The armament was increased by twin fifty-caliber machine guns, and one single fifty. The *Jones* now boasted two stern-chasers and a "Long Tom" forward, all obtained from the aircraft salvage dump. There were drawbacks. At certain angles of

fire we risked shooting away the wooden canopy, the awning with its flimsy supports, the masts and rigging, and anyone standing in the line of fire. Major F. H. Smyth, Marine Field Commander at Munda, sent two sergeants to train the native crew in gunnery. When the time came to sail, both Goodermude and Hayden were able to get permission to make the trip.

On July 27, 1944, we left Hambu-Hambu, a small island on Munda Bar and site of Clemens' Headquarters. There was scarcely an inch of the *Jones* not occupied by a native or by stores, trade goods, and ammunition which we spent two days loading aboard. The Major and I sat majestically on the poop in two large deck chairs, the machine-gun mount between us. The small after-cabin contained the radio transmitter with a half-dozen batteries and cases of canned goods and beer. A portable writing desk was lashed to the side of the companionway that led to the cabin. Each Marine sergeant with his bed-roll had a space two feet by twelve on either side of the cabin. The Major's cook, Alec, set up his stove beside the main hatch, aft of the engine room in the ship's waist—a fifty-five gallon oil drum, one side cut open, fitted with an iron grating, fed from a pile of wood on deck. Fifteen Melanesians managed to eat, sleep, and play a perpetual card game in the remaining thirty feet of boat.

The steering wheel and binnacle were amidships. When we pulled away from the wharf at Hambu-Hambu with the boys on the *Jones* and their friends on the beach waving their lavalavas, shouting and singing, I noticed that the helmsman was facing backwards—hardly orthodox naval procedure. This was Boatswain Tarevo, who preferred to sit on the compass than to stand in the conventional manner behind it. He considered it a useless, although comfortable, piece of equipment. By sitting on the binnacle he could steer with his hands or with his feet—a choice dictated by the exigencies of the card game. We came alongside Munda Pier fifteen minutes later to take ammunition aboard, and the engineer displayed similar agility. Jonathan stood in the engine-room companionway to get a view of the docking operations, and he kicked the shifting lever of the engine whenever a change of direction was required and manipulated the throttle with his big toe.

The first day we threaded our way past Wana-Wana and through Diamond and Ondonga Narrows. We then had to cruise seventy-five miles between New Georgia and Choiseul, of which fifty miles was sailed in open sea after we left the sheltered water of Kula Gulf between New Georgia and Kolombangara. The *Jones* rolled along in a stiff

southeast breeze, the seas off her starboard quarter. The forestaysail was set more to steady than to drive the ship faster, since every time we rolled with a particularly heavy swell we flooded the deck amidships and threatened to drench Alec's stove. The course was laid for the village of Boe-Boe. Major Clemens intended to send runners to the interior to inform the district headmen of his arrival. We hoped, without any positive information, that no Japanese would be that far south.

My navigation was sedentary. I tacked an azimuth circle to the arm of my chair and lined it fore-and-aft. With a sight bar made of wire and fishing line, it was easy to take bearings on known points of land to compute speed and position. To change heading meant shouting to Tarevo, "Stop 'long compass-fella 'long north northeast," and soon the Jones would slowly swing around to the new course. At first the crew was impressed by "business b'long compass." When Boe-Boe was reached on the first day, my prestige as Number Two Master was high. Unfortunately a sizable compass error arose when the Jones sailed on an easterly or westerly heading. The next day, steering west-north-west, my armchair navigation sent us ten miles further up the coast than planned. Henceforth Tarevo accepted sailing directions with polite, smiling disbelief and steered as he pleased.

With exception of the Major's gun-bearer, Lendi, and two scouts (bush-people from the interior of Malaita), the natives on board were saltwater boys from coastal villages on Choiseul and New Georgia: dark-skinned Melanesians, short and stocky. Lendi was taller and slighter. A lad of eighteen, he had been with Clemens since the Major's pre-war days as cadet officer and later district officer on Malaita. Like most of the bush people he was chocolate-colored. With woolly hair dyed red and a perpetual grin, he looked like a Melanesian Harpo Marx. Whenever we landed, either he or Michael, Clemens' Number One Boy, walked an exact six paces behind his master, and Lendi carried the Lee-Enfield rifle and a bandolier of cartridges. Clemens carried a bamboo swagger stick. He had been one of three Englishmen to remain on Guadalcanal during the Japanese occupation in the spring and summer of 1942; and he had retreated from the northern beaches and Kunai grass plains when the Japanese landed, after supervising the evacuation of Europeans from the island. Radio messages to the New Hebrides and New Zealand made his presence known to the enemy, and they pursued him with intensity—even using bloodhounds in the jungle. He eluded his hunters by moving rapidly in the mountains. This was three

BEACHHEAD BY SCHOONER IN THE SOLOMONS

133

months full of narrow escapes: as the Major put it, "a bloody good show."

The first day set the general pattern. We talked and read in our deck chairs as the *Jones* dipped in the frisky sea. At noon Alec cleared a table, spread the first tablecloth I had seen in a year, and appeared with a leg of mutton, Irish potatoes, and Chinese cabbage. We washed this down with New Zealand ale drawn from four cases piled in the after cabin. By midafternoon Choiseul lay before us, emerging from an indefinable bank of clouds on the northern horizon. Soon we could make out colors and contours: the light green of the tiny yellow-bordered islets around its periphery, the darker green of the jungle and the mountains which blended into the amorphous, shapeless, ever changing grayness occasionally shot through by flashes of sunlight. We were aiming for a village fifteen miles from Choiseul's southeastern point.

The conversation ranged from comparisons of English and American universities, through the merits of the Beveridge Plan, and finally settled on Shakespeare. I had brought a single-volume edition of his plays—the rats in the cabin later chewed off the leather cover—and I found myself thumbing *Richard II* to steady my nerves. Just when we were discussing whether the shift in sympathy for the protagonist was an effective dramatic device, the headlands enclosing Boe-Boe village emerged from the steaming jungle to shape themselves into beaches and clumps of palms. We moved to the history plays. The Major thought that the *Henry* cycle was underrated when compared to the tragedies. Even as he declaimed with appropriateness Henry Fifth's speech, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; Or close the wall up with our English dead!" the crew stopped their interminable card game and silently lined the forward rail, peering at the bush which might be concealing several hundred Japanese. Our two Marines were uneasy. Hayden stood with one hand on his single fifty near the bowsprit. Goodermude sat on the cabin house, anxiously eyeing me for an order. I was sure he wanted to uncover the twin-fifty that stood consolingly a foot from my chair.

At this point *Henry IV* and *East Lynne* were one to me. I estimated how long it would take to get my forty-five-calibre pistol resting on the ale cases below. I also wondered whether I should toot my whistle—the signal for General Quarters. The silence was broken by Major Clemens' crisp voice.

"Alec!" The frightened cook ran aft, stood stiffly at attention.

"Which way 'long tea? You no savvy business b'long you? Bringim tea number-one quick time. Me cross too much 'long you. Mightie you catchem sack b'long you bimeby."

I sat with Shakespeare clutched to my nervous stomach. Alec returned with a teapot. The two sergeants watched with amazement, and their disquietude was not diminished when the Major invited them to join us. They declined politely. We were now inside the cove. Except for short remarks as we sipped tea, there was no sound save the putt-putting of the Diesel and the water gurgling in our wake. The jungle was a hundred yards off either beam. We rounded a bend in the channel between two small islands, and Boe-Boe swung into sight. It was deserted: no sign of any inhabitants, no children and dogs played about the water's edge, no smoke arising from the thatched huts.

Scores of Japanese might well have been hiding within peashooter range. I managed to ask, "Major, should we uncover the guns?"

"Scarcely necessary. Waste of time. Bad for morale. You might tell Tarevo to drop the hook, or whatever you Navy men say when you want to anchor. If you don't say something, we run a fair chance of sitting on the beach." I was reminded that I was sailing master. "Loos'em anchor, Tarevo."

The chain clattered from the hawsepipe, and the Jones' old-fashioned ship's anchor hit the water with a splash that sent a flock of birds screaming out of the treetops. I walked forward to supervise the departure of the dinghy for the beach. Two boys pulled the double-ended boat from the stern. Sergeant Gumu and his seven scouts jumped in from the port gangway, armed with rifles and the Lewis gun. The two marines stood diffidently up forward. I hesitated to tell them to uncover our main armament, such as it was, and took recourse to that vague military command—"Stand by." Later we sent them ashore to stand guard with Gumu and the scouts.

Gumu and his men landed, set up the Lewis gun with two natives as a covering force, and disappeared into the bush. They returned at dusk to say that they found no natives in a two-mile radius. Concealed machine gun pits in a few huts indicated that the enemy had formerly occupied the site, and there had been a recent evacuation. We posted pickets on the outskirts of Boe-Boe and uncovered the bow machine gun.

The waning moon rose early. The high-peaked, straw-colored houses stood out clearly against the dark background of tufted coconut palms. One could barely make out the shapes of the gun on the nearby beach,

the dinghy drawn up close by, the marines sitting with Gumu around a dim fire. The ship's crew were playing cards on the foc's'l, gathered about an oil lamp on the fore-hatch. The only sound was the hum of conversation up forward, the lapping of tiny waves under the counter, the creaking of rigging as we rolled gently in the swells that reached us from the sea, the occasional cry of a night bird swooping across the star-spotted sky. The musty jungle smell blended with the salt air. Alec set up two canvas cots on the poop. We turned in.

I awoke next morning with the mist rising lazily from the bush. Alec appeared with a cup of tea while I was still leaning on one elbow scanning the beach. We had not yet finished breakfast when the dinghy came alongside bearing Gumu and three Boe-Boe natives. The Jones had been observed from the heights, and now several headmen and their people were moving down the trails to the beach after they decided we were not Japanese. By nine o'clock a hundred men gathered on shore "for hearem big talk and business b'long British Commissioner." The Major stepped briskly from the port gangway where Michael stood saluting at the rail. After Clemens took his seat in the stern sheets, dressed in spotless khaki shorts and shirt and bearing his swagger stick, at a word of command from Tarevo the four boys dropped their upped oars and gave way together like the crew of a captain's gig from a full-size man-of-war. The dinghy grated on the black sand beach. Sergeant Gumu and the scouts, drawn up at attention—the two Marines also took part in this miniature review—came to a quick "Present Arms." Clemens jumped from the unsteady boat to be received by three old headmen, each carrying his staff of office. They bowed. Clemens saluted, then shook hands gravely. The party walked to the council house on the outskirts of the jungle. From this first palaver we discovered that the nearest Japanese were no nearer than Vozoi, forty-five miles up the coast. The position of the enemy on the north shore was less definite. A week earlier we might have met with a less-friendly reception at Boe-Boe.

Runners were sent to notify all the districts of our arrival, and to tell the coastal villages that we intended to pay them a call. Clemens marched back to the dinghy, leaving behind cases of calico and plug tobacco. As soon as he stepped aboard—now I, entering into the ceremony stood at attention—the boys heaved on the windlass, the anchor and seven fathoms of chain were stowed, the Diesel chugged bravely, and we slowly left. The crowd on the beach, augmented by women and "small-fella-pickannin'," waved their colored lavalavas. Alec opened a couple of bottles of warm ale. I played with my charts, the

marines cleaned their machine guns, the card game started again, and Tarevo broke out three fishing lines and trolled over the stern.

We landed two dozen king mackerel during the entire expedition, and as many bonito, and a species called *mera* which resembled a large pompano. Fishing was conducted with the punctilio of a grouse-shoot in Scotland. Tarevo would solemnly inform the Major when he had a strike; and if we desired sport, we would play the fish and bring it alongside the counter to be gaffed by Tarevo. Except for poisonous trigger-fish and several brilliant-red varieties, everything was edible. The boys dove for oysters in the coral reefs each time we landed.

The immediate plan was to sail east-southeast for five miles to Nagoselle Pass, the narrow channel between Rob Roy Island and Choiseul. A local native pilot squatted on the bowsprit and conned the helmsman with a wave of his hand. We entered Nagoselle an hour and a half later to buck an adverse three-knot current—better than half our speed. At certain points the channel was no wider than seventy-five feet. Thick jungles arose on either side—green, lush, and impenetrable—and creepers and lianas brushed over the rigging. Save for two mudbanks, we saw no bottom. The few soundings showed nothing under the keel at ten fathoms. The Marines and I sat with Owens-guns on the wooden shelter over the poop, to try to bag wild pigeons. All we saw were red parrots and brilliant green parakeets, one or two herons and frigate birds, and one creature that may have been a quail, and these flew up excitedly from the steaming palms, banyans, and bamboos before we could aim. The rain drizzled intermittently. The chugging *Jones* seemed to labor against atmosphere and current while she pressed through the humid, dead air and the heavy, dank decay of the bush—a décor one associates with the rivers of the African Congo rather than with the palmy isles of the South Pacific.

The first whiffs of salt air indicated that we were approaching the sea. Alec came aft with white tablecloth and silver cutlery. "Bimeby kai-kai [food] him 'e ready." We picked our way between reefs at the north end of Rob Roy, and came around to a northeast course parallel to the beach. A following sea raised the ship's counter, buried her bow in a restful, rocking-chair rhythm. Our destination was Nuhatambu thirty miles up the coast. The already-limited visibility closed in. We passed through several rain squalls and lightning storms, when the crew dashed about to lash down the awnings and side-curtains. Occasionally a promontory loomed to port on the inhospitable coast. We chugged along—one very small ship alone in a chaotic sea—with the only setting

BEACHHEAD BY SCHOONER IN THE SOLOMONS

137

the dull green swells into which our bowsprit clove, the angular and angry breaking crests abeam, the confused foam behind, the gloomy clouds scudding overhead. Clemens and I put on oilskins and sat silently on the poop.

The weather cleared when we slipped into the cove where Nuhatambu, like Boe-Boe, lay deserted. For a second time the rusty anchor chain rattled through the hawsepipe. Gumu, the scouts, and the two Marines piled into the dinghy with the Lewis gun, their bedding and supplies. After supper a half-dozen natives came aboard in the twilight from two slender gondola-like canoes. Willie Paia brought them aft. We both rose from our chairs and shook hands. Willie translated their comments into pidgin English. They reported that the Jones had been anxiously observed all afternoon. The runners from Boe-Boe had not yet reached the interior; but after a hasty palaver, the assorted village headmen decided we were friendly—the British ensign had been spotted whenever the rain squalls lifted. The people of the district moved down the jungle paths to Pagoi, ten miles further. The Major told the group to collect everyone there the next morning to hear “talk b’long guv-man.” We shook hands once more. The two graceful canoes sped for the shore, their high sterns wiggling in the mild chop like peacock tails.

The next morning I went ashore with the Marines. We beached the dinghy on the yellow sand and walked through Nuhatambu. The jungle had covered the trails with a thick network of vines and creepers. The palm-leaf huts with their intricately thatched walls and roofs were in a state of decay; the ravages of wind, rain, and dry rot had been aided by wood-boring red ants, the sole sign of activity in an otherwise lifeless village. Patches of heavy undergrowth intruded into the once neat taro gardens and breadfruit, papaya, and cassava groves. The air was heavy with the pungent odor of rotting coconuts and the sweet, overpowering smell of frangipani. We walked with difficulty over dead logs, some covered with small white orchids. Everywhere were bougainvillea, hibiscus flowers, and flame trees.

In the empty huts there were a few discarded, broken cooking utensils and fragments of coconut matting, one badly damaged Singer sewing-machine, and a large chest filled with Seventh Day Adventist tracts written in a Melanesian dialect. More sinister were six Japanese helmets—why had they been thrown away?—and as many empty wooden boxes painted with Japanese characters. We left the land for the sanctuary of the Jones.

The good humor of the Melanesians was never more apparent than in the short play I witnessed earlier. That morning the watch had failed to make reveille at six o'clock. Clemens assembled the crew before I left to inspect Nuhatambu to call them "bloody fools, altogether lazy-fella too much, altogether fella all-same pig-pig 'long pig pen." Later as I sat on the poop cleaning my pistol—the Major absent ashore—I watched one boy standing pompously on the hatch amidships, a battered sun helmet on his lime-bleached kinky pomadour, a stick under his armpit. The laughing crew surrounded him while he parodied the Number One Master and shouted "Bloody fool, bloody fool!" They saw me watching and sheepishly scattered.

That afternoon we stopped at Pagoi for Clemens to address several hundred natives. Once more the boat crew rowed him smartly to the beach. At a signal from the nervous headman, the crowd burst into "God Save the King." The palaver lasted over an hour, the Major flanked by Gumu and Michael.

We weighed anchor and sailed peacefully along. Unfolding slowly to port was a strip of yellow sand, dazzling in the tropical sun. Languid breakers rolled on the beach to cover it briefly with a creamy sheet of foam. Behind this border stood a fringe of light-green coconut palms waving in the breeze. Then—to complete the progression from movement to stasis—the jungle-covered hills and mountains sat in the background: dark-green, ageless, reflecting their primordial proximity with a volcanic past; mist-covered, craggy, sullen, forbidding. The Jones crept slowly toward Salamandu by the fringe of the barrier reef where coral outcroppings manifested themselves in swirls, disturbed eddies, momentary eruptions of white breakers. We snoozed quietly in our deck chairs. Suddenly the drowsy lookout shouted "Airoplani him'e come!" . . . and dropped the fishline attached to his big toe. We jumped up and identified the plane as an SBD—Suzy Biddle Diddle, to use Clemens' terminology. Still scarcely awake, I grabbed the portable Aldis lamp stowed below and clambered up the rigging. I blinked "Able"—da-dah—to indicate all was well.

The crew was delighted when Major Smyth swooped low over our stubby masts. They clambered up the ratlines and waved their lavalavas. Only the helmsman, the two Marines, and Clemens and I were left on deck. The circling plane dropped two small parachutes and the Jones turned slowly to pick them out of the calm sea. A half-dozen boys twitched their shirts off and dove over the side, racing to see who could capture the prizes. Three minutes later Clemens opened aluminum

containers and drew out identical messages printed on waterproof silk. Yesterday four B-25's had flown low over Choiseul Bay (now forty-five miles away). The bombers had thought the Japs to be without anti-aircraft weapons. There was an unpleasant surprise when the enemy opened up with heavy, accurate machine-gun fire. All four planes were hit. One was forced to make a water-landing near the Treasury Islands, held by the Allies. We were advised that SBD's would bomb Choiseul Bay within the next twenty-four hours, and we had better stay clear. The Japs were in better strength than we had expected.

A change of plans was imperative. We had to give up our original intention to circumnavigate Choiseul. Clemens decided to sail along the northern shore to Malaenari, a village five miles from the northwest tip of the island and the enemy. We would then turn around, retrace our course, pass again through Nagosele, to undertake a similar limited cruise on the southern coast. Some fifteen or twenty miles of Choiseul would not be covered—a stretch of enemy-held beach I felt we might avoid with pleasure. The Major was disappointed. "It might have been a bloody good show. . . ."

There was a chance that a Japanese patrol could spot the Jones as we skirted the barrier reef. I was relieved when Clemens agreed to my request to uncover the machine guns.

We passed Salamandu and reached Malaenari at 5:30. The Jones slipped through the gap in the reef, and the anchor was dropped when we rounded up a scant hundred yards from shore. Malaenari was deserted. In the center of the thatched huts stood the Roman Catholic Mission; a low, yellow frame house with a faded red tin roof and long verandah. The front door hung askew on one hinge. The shutters moved slightly in the evening breeze. The Marines and Gumu set up the Lewis gun on the porch to command both the beach and the paths entering the village. After the scouts reported no Japs in the vicinity, Clemens sent two Pagoi boys to find Father Benois, the aged priest who had refused to leave Choiseul when all Europeans were evacuated in 1942.

The next morning the Major landed for his palaver. The crew swabbed the decks, painted and scraped under Tarevo's watchful eye; the Marines cleaned the fifties; I settled down on the poop to read. I heard a farewell shout from the shore, looked over the rail, and saw the dinghy shoved from the beach by a dozen wading natives. In the stern sheets sat Clemens with another European. We lined the starboard rail as they came briskly alongside. A small, elderly, bearded man—thin to the point of emaciation—came aboard with agility and gaily

waved aside the hand I ventured to offer him. Clemens followed. All three of us stood in the waist as introductions were made. First Father Benois shook my hand, then those of the two Marines, then he turned to the crew who gathered about us and had the Major introduce him to each man. A few natives giggled. Two bowed low and crossed themselves. ("First time I knew they were Catholics," muttered the Major in my ear.)

Alec served lunch. While the priest wolfed down a meal of mutton, Chinese cabbage and boiled potatoes, I had ample opportunity for observation. He talked—or rather shouted animatedly—in almost unintelligible English marked by a strong French accent. I switched to French at one point. Father Benois was delighted and said he had heard little French since leaving France in 1922. He laughingly admitted that he found English easier, although the only language he could handle with fluency was the Choiseul dialect.

He was sixty-four. He might have been eighty, so wrinkled and lined was his tan leathery face. He wore a battered gray felt hat, a clean and ragged skivvy-shirt, patched khaki trousers. His thin legs were wrapped in canvas puttees which barely met the edge of heavy, cracked, black-leather, high-top walking shoes. A pair of intense, rheumy eyes peered from behind thick spectacles.

The native congregation deserted Malaenari mission in 1942. Three of his flock helped maintain a camp and garden in the mountains, five miles away. I questioned him.

"Why did you leave, *mon père*?"

"My children were frightened, and wanted not to remain on the coast. And alone I could not run my house." (He pointed sadly to the mission building, and I noticed that one of the verandahs had collapsed, termite-ridden). "And the gardens are far from the village. Also, where my flock went, there I had to go. The Japanese burnt my little church, anyway."

"Why did they leave your house standing, *mon père*?"

"Who knows? They are unpredictable, capricious. Perhaps they once thought it would do for a headquarters? It is a lovely house. . . ."

"Have they troubled you?"

He shrugged his spare shoulders, gestured phlegmatically with one bony, blue-veined hand, and his eyes looked up over our mainmast to the blue sky. "They have visited me perhaps five, six times in nine months. First time, they took my vestments and crucifix and—*comment dit-on* 'calice'? ("Chalice' *mon père*")—my chalice away. They joked.

One soldier spoke bad English. He asked me now whether I could still be a priest without my toys. The other visits were not bad. They took some of my people to work for them at Choiseul Bay. But my people always run away. Then—oh yes, I almost forget—then a month ago they came back. They were angry. My flock, they said, was not helping. Had they not come to free the islanders from the hateful English? I was bad: I did not persuade my people to help. So—I think they wanted to punish me—they took away what I saved of tinned food and pipe-tobacco. Still, lieutenant, they are not completely bad, these Japanese. They are naughty children sometimes. But with women: bad. Even I cannot forgive what they did to some of my girls. . . . But I think they are frightened. *Dites-moi*, Major, are the Allies winning the war? And when do the British come back to Choiseul?"

"Yes, yes, we're winning. We'll be back soon." Father Benois' apparent objectivity about the conflict indicated a man who saw the struggle *sub specie aeternitatis*. "Tell me, what do you know about the Nips? How many of 'em are there?"

"Oh, there must be four, five hundred. My people tell me that they are encamped at the Bay where the old plantations used to be. They live well off the gardens they have forced my people to grow."

"What about their barges?" Here was a question close to both of us. I suspect Clemens' good Anglo-Saxon blood thrilled at the thought of a sea battle with one small English vessel playing a modern version of Sir Richard Grenville's *The Revenge*. My own less-heroic mind performed calculations about comparative speed, inferior numbers, and our small fire power.

"No, the barges do not run. Or so some of my boys have told me. They lack essence, petrol. They are broken."

Clemens and I reached for our pipes simultaneously and smoked with relaxation. Clemens sent Alec below to give the priest all the trade-tobacco he could spare. "What of submarines? We heard the Nips may be getting supplies from Kavieng."

"No, Major. My people would have told me. They know everything about the Japanese. The commander, a Colonel, is unpopular. He is *une personne forte sur la discipline*—a martinet, I think you say in English. His troops are homesick. He tells them about Hirohito and Dai Nippon. My people say that the Japanese do not listen, or if they listen they do not believe him any more." For the first time, Father Benois seemed to be taking sides. He laughed delightedly at the thought of the discomforted enemy.

There seemed no longer any reason to stay at Malaenari. The peaceful scene on the beach, with groups of natives bathing, cooking-fires relit in several huts and children and puppy dogs playing in the clearing, made one forget the Japanese a scant four miles away. I had recalled one Marine to the Jones after breakfast, and he stood on the foc's'l by his single fifty. His colleague was still on the porch of the mission, sitting with Gumu and the scouts near their Lewis gun—a diminutive beachhead, if suddenly attacking Japanese swarmed out from the bush. I climbed the canopy and semaphored for a general evacuation. Our expedition up the northern coast of Choiseul was complete. The Jones weighed anchor, Tarevo officiously shouting commands to his amused crew. Behind us natives clustered about the cases of trading-goods we had left behind, waved their lavalavas silently and a little sadly.

The trip to Sisindu was a three-hour run. The old Jones seemed to share the general delight of the ship's company as she stuck her stubby bow into the short chop. Clemens invited Father Benois to return to Munda with us, and from thence to go to Australia.

"You better come, Padre. Don't know when we'll get back to Choiseul."

"No, thank you. You are kind. But I must stay. My people need me."

"But you say that your 'people' have scattered. And the next visit the Nips pay may be less gentle. They must know that you have talked with me. They will not like you for the information you have told us. I think you are foolish."

"Perhaps, Major. But my duty You must understand." Here the priest smiled at his happy analogy. "You too do your duty by sailing to Choiseul, you and the young lieutenant and the two Marines. . . ."

"A different matter." Clemens lit another pipe. The subject was changed. Sisindu hove in sight. The boat crew rowed Father Benois ashore with a sack of canned goods and tobacco. We waved goodbye as he walked into the bush with the springy stride of a young man. He and his native bearer were quickly swallowed up in the green foliage.

The rest of the expedition resembled all that has been related. We sailed back through Nogosele, laden with fifteen passengers bound for the south shore. This time a favorable current twisted us through the jungle at a dizzy eight knots. There were stops at Susuka, Pagoi and Boe-Boe. We crept up the southern coast of Sambi, Nabusasa, and finally Sasamunga, where as at Malaenari, we came close to the enemy. Thence

we crossed the Kula Gulf bound for Munda, spending one night in Bamberi Harbor on Kolombangara. I went ashore at Sambu to hear the Major give his speech, and admired his astuteness in convincing a Seventh Day Adventist non-pork-eating population to break this taboo. (They had been fish-eating, saltwater people, and the migration to the bush had seriously affected their health.) They complained wild pigs were eating their gardens. His answer: why not eat the pigs to regain the lost produce? Then he resorted to comparative religion, pointing out that *Number One Bishop b'long Catholic* allowed Catholic soldiers to eat meat on Fridays: "Altogether savvy fish him 'e no stop 'long foxhole." He added, with a harmless casuistry, that *Number One Bishop b'long Jew* also permitted Jewish soldiers to eat pork. Since the Melanesians were familiar with Old Testament prohibitions about eating swine, Clemens' point was cogent. We heard a month later via canoe that the Sambu people were eating pig-pig without any moral compunction.

A thirty-knot squall hit the *Jones* off Sambu Head late one afternoon. The dinghy capsized, the steering cables broke, and we almost piled up on a nearby reef. We doused the forestaysail in time, but the awnings blew away to leeward. Tarevo jumped over the fantail and sat astride the small boat shouting "Goddam, goddam, goddam" as he tried to right it. Finally, he succeeded and bailed it out, just as sheets of rain stopped to disclose the crests of ugly breakers, green and white on the reefs one hundred yards to port. Alec's cookstove overturned, but since he had resourcefully thrown some logs down the engine-room hatch when the storm struck—to the indignation of the engineer, who had to protect his Diesel from this cascade of kindling—we had tea on schedule.

Early morning, August fifth, we passed quietly through Hathorn Sound, Ondonga and Diamond Narrows, and chugged alongside the wharf at Hambu-Hambu before lunch. Sergeant Esau, left in charge during Major Clemens' absence, strutted down the dock followed by a guard of honor: lavalavas freshly washed for the great occasion, mushroom-shaped coiffures newly lime-bleached, one or two young bucks with red hibiscus flowers in the hair to signify they were looking for wives. Behind swarmed two dozen small boys, chests stuck out and arms swinging in imitation of their older brothers. The Second Allied Invasion of Choiseul was over.

The third invasion of the island took place in May, 1945, some ten months after we had left. By late August the Japanese surrendered. I am happy the *B. F. Jones* played a leading role. Lieutenant Sproule Bolton, formerly of the Coldstream Guards and attached to Major Clemens as a Cadet Officer in September, 1944, wrote me a description of the last chapter.

. . . In May Martin Clemens sent me up to Choyseul and I got myself attached to the A.I.B. [Australian Infantry Brigade] crowd, who then had 500 or 600 Nips who were waiting to get out. I finished up by having a terrific row with them but more of that later. They were in the position of not having a boat and so the *B. F. Jones* became their demi-official line of communication between Choyseul and Treasury, and I the skipper. We had to run nearly all their supplies in for them, and as you know the Bougainville Strait is not the best bit of water. The Nips evacuated Choyseul in June 1945, and on June 27th the R.N.Z.A.F. [Royal New Zealand Air Force]—damn them—who had been briefed on to primary targets in Bougainville, and were given by their intelligence secondary targets in Choyseul (God knows why) finding their aforesaid targets clouded over, and having a lot of amunition to spare, came and shot us up for about 45 minutes, ruining a perfectly good wireless set, and generator, and killing one dog. I later went up to Torakina and shook the hand of the Bastard who had done this gallant deed. . . .