

UNITED STATES NAVAL ADMINISTRATION IN WORLD WAR II

COMMANDER IN CHIEF, PACIFIC FLEET

MOTOR TORPEDO BOAT SQUADRONS

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INTRODUCTION

When the task of recording the activities of Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons, PACIFIC Fleet [ComMTBRonsPac] was undertaken, it was intended that only those matters pertaining to that command should be included. (This work would be similar to others on the activities of Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons, SEVENTH Fleet, and Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons, Philippine Sea Frontier.) However, it soon became apparent that rigid restriction of the scope of this history to the Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons, PACIFIC Fleet, would result in the exclusion of the major part of the motor torpedo boat operations which were conducted under other subordinate PACIFIC Fleet commands, particularly those which predated the activation of the PACIFIC Fleet type command on 5 March 1944. Therefore, this history has been expanded to embrace the administration of all motor torpedo boat squadrons which operated under and in coordination with CinCPac [Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet] and subordinate commands from the date of the arrival of the first motor torpedo boats in the Solomons in October 1942 until the cessation of hostilities on 14 August 1945.

The delay in the establishment of a motor torpedo boat type command within the PACIFIC Fleet can be attributed in part to the fact that the motor torpedo boat of World War II was a new weapon whose employment and true military value, in so far as the U. S. Navy was concerned, had not been determined prior to the outbreak of hostilities. But the measure of success which had been obtained with the use of this type craft in the Philippines in the early days of the war indicated that it had a place in the naval organization. Furthermore, the ability to produce this type of craft in relatively large numbers in a short period of time, and the ability to employ it in forward areas where major vessels could not remain for extended periods of time predicated its use in the Solomons and New Guinea campaigns. However, much remained to be learned relative to the administration, operation and maintenance of this type of craft before its true military value could be determined. Thus, as the motor torpedo boat activities in the Solomons evolved from a single squadron of eight boats to a flotilla of several squadrons, and , later to what amounted to a type command within a PACIFIC Fleet subordinate command (Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons, South Pacific Force), and as the motor torpedo boat underwent the metamorphosis from a true motor torpedo boat to a hybrid motor torpedo boat-motor gunboat, the activation of a motor torpedo boat type command was a logical step in the development of the motor torpedo boat administration.

The lack of accurate and complete documentation has prevented a detailed coverage of the period which predated the activation of the type command. Thus, in Chapter I [also named Part I], the

historians have endeavored to present the overall picture of motor torpedo boat activities during the embryonic stage, with particular attention devoted to those factors which provided the prime motivation for the eventual activation of the type command.

It was normal to assume that with the activation of the type command, ComMTBRonsPac would exercise the prerogatives and functions usually delegated a type commander. However, by March 1944, the Solomons campaign had been resolved to a blockading operation, and with the continued existence of the SoPac [South Pacific] type command, ComMTBRonsSoPac, and with the exclusion of those motor torpedo boat units which operated in the Southwest Pacific from the jurisdiction of ComMTBRonsPac, the new type command failed to have any immediate effect on the administration of motor torpedo boat activities. There was no outward and visible sign that ComMTBRonsPac even existed; it remained a command in name only. The factors which led to the activation of ComMTBRonsPac are fairly obvious, but the factors that militated against the command attaining its normal stature for more than a year after its inception are somewhat obscure. The historians have attempted to delve into this obscurity and present as accurate a record as possible. However, it has been virtually impossible to define clearly the line of demarcation between the administrative jurisdiction of ComMTBRonsPac and other motor torpedo boat administrative commands which were responsible to PACIFIC Fleet subordinate commands during the period 5 March 1944 to 4 April 1945.

During this period in which Commodore E. J. Moran, USN, served as ComMTBRonsPac, this lack of sharp delineation of command responsibility was keynoted by the fact that Commodore Moran was invested with more than one command; from 5 March 1944 to 15 June 1944, Commodore Moran served as ComMTBRonsPac, ComMTBRonsSoPac and CTG 30.3; from 15 June 1944 to 1 March 1945, he served as ComMTBRonsPac, ComMTBRonsSoPac, ComNavNorSols, ComSerFor7thFltSubCom, and CTG 70.8; from 1 March 1945 to 4 April 1945 he served as ComMTBRonsPac and ComMTBRonsSoPac, but he was on temporary additional duty in the Navy Department during this period. During the first period there is no evidence that ComMTBRonsPac exercised any administrative functions. No motor torpedo boats were assigned to his command. Those motor torpedo boat activities coming within the jurisdiction of Commodore Moran were administered by him in his capacity as ComMTBRonsSoPac, not as ComMTBRonsPac. During the early part of the second period, Commodore Moran exercised operational control over seven motor torpedo boat squadrons in his capacity as ComNavNorSols and CTG 70.8 (SEVENTH Fleet subordinate commands), while he exercised administrative control over these same units in his capacity as ComMTBRonsPac (a PACIFIC Fleet subordinate command). These squadrons had been assigned to the SEVENTH Fleet by CNO, and there is no record to indicate that either CNO or CinCPac was cognizant of this anomaly. During the latter part of the second period three motor torpedo boat squadrons reported to ComMTBRonsPac for type administration; these were the first squadrons to be so assigned by CNO since the activation of the command. However, these squadrons reported to ComSoPac for operational control and he in turn assigned them to ComNavNorSols for temporary duty.

Thus, in Chapters II and III [parts II and III], in order to preserve the chronology of motor torpedo boat activities within the PACIFIC Fleet, the historians have found it necessary to record the activities of motor torpedo boats in the light of ComMTBRonsSoPac or ComNavNorSols rather than of ComMTBRonsPac. The vitality of the former commands when contrasted with the relative impotency of

the latter and the tendency to submerge the identity of ComMTBRonsPac during this era have made this device necessary.

In Chapter IV the historians have attempted to set forth the steps which were undertaken in reactivating the type command. True, this reactivation did not reach its fullest fruition prior to the cessation of hostilities. But, the foundation was laid; the trend toward the existence of a vital motor torpedo boat type command was clearly indicated. After a long period of confusion and duplicity of administrative and operational jurisdiction, all motor torpedo boats in the Pacific theater were to be under one type command.

The preparation of this historical record has been complicated by the lack of accurate and complete documentation for the period prior to 1 March 1945; oftentimes it has been necessary to resort to deduction and inference in order to round out the picture. More often, it has been necessary to augment documentary evidence with additional information which has been obtained through correspondence and interview with officers familiar with motor torpedo boat activities in the period concerned. The historians wish to express their sincere appreciation to those who have so generously cooperated in the preparation of this history and except for whom much valuable data would have been unobtainable.

PART I¹

BACKGROUND

The interest which had been evidenced by the late President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had provided the impetus necessary to induce the Navy Department to undertake considerable experimentation with motor torpedo boats during 1940 and 1941 in an effort to determine their possible employment as a naval weapon. Although many officers in the higher echelons of command had not been thoroughly convinced of the effectiveness of these wooden “cockle-shells” as a destructive weapon against modern men-of-war, the energies of several motor torpedo boat enthusiasts had resulted in the assignment of squadrons to the Philippines and to Pearl Harbor by late fall of 1941.

Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron TWO (a portion of which by redesignation later became Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron THREE) was stationed in New York at the time when Japanese planes were devastating Pearl Harbor. It was immediately alerted for forward movement and the eleven 77-foot Elco type boats were loaded aboard the USS HAMMONDSPORT and the USS KITTY HAWK. On 17 December 1941 these two ships departed for Balboa, C. Z., where the squadron was destined to become a part of the defensive bulwark of the Panama Sea Frontier. There, these motor torpedo boats, with their four torpedoes, provided a fast, mobile defense against any enemy task force that might slip through the outer defenses and attempt a surprise attack from the Pacific side of the Canal. Though there were many false reports concerning prospective enemy attacks on the Canal, and though the presence of enemy submarines in the Bay of Panama was often reported, no actual contact with the enemy was ever made. The majority of the squadron’s operations consisted of participation in numerous drills, providing escort services, and performing the inevitable miscellaneous tasks of courier duty, mail runs, and “taxi-service”.

In the early summer of 1942 three boats which formerly had been attached to Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron FOUR arrived in Balboa, C. Z., having made the trip from Melville, Rhode Island, under their own power. These boats were assigned to Squadron TWO, which increased the total number of boats attached to this squadron to fourteen. The armament of the three new boats differed from that of the original eleven in that the aft torpedoes had been removed and had been replaced by eight depth charges. A 20mm gun mounted on the centerline aft had also been added. These craft, however, were relatively ineffectual in anti-submarine warfare as they lacked sonic equipment.²

¹ Data for this chapter has been obtained from the files at the Naval Records Management Center (Western Division), from an unidentified history of MTB’s in the Solomons, and from interviews and/or correspondence with Capt. E. J. Moran, USN, (formerly ComMTBRonsSoPac, ComMTBRonsPac, etc.), Capt. A. P. Calvert, USN, (formerly ComMTBFlot ONE), Lt. Comdr. C. W. Faulkner, USNR, (formerly ComMTBRon 6), Lt. Comdr. M. E. Wertz, Jr., USNR, (formerly attached to MTBRon 2), and Lt. Comdr. R. C. Wark, USNR, (formerly attached to MTBRon 3).

² In the early part of 1941 the Navy had experimented with the use of the 70-foot Elco type boat as an anti-submarine weapon. This type had been equipped with sonic equipment and depth charges. However, after extensive tests the project had been abandoned as the boat’s power plant created excessive sonic interference, which had necessitated securing the main propulsion equipment (Packard engines) in order to obtain contact with a submerged object.

Shortly after the arrival of the three new boats Squadron TWO was alerted for movement to the combat area. In accordance with a CNO directive, eight boats were prepared for immediate transshipment. Two divisions of four boats each were formed; each division was comprised of three of the original eleven boats and one of the three new boats.

Lt. Comdr. A. R. Montgomery, USN, who in June 1942 had relieved Lt. Comdr. E. S. Caldwell, USN, as Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron TWO, was now ordered to assume command of the new unit, which as yet had no designation. The remainder of the personnel were selected by the utilization of two lists: one list contained the names of all officers and men who volunteered for the new assignment; the other list contained the names of the officers and men whom the Squadron Commander and the Executive Officer considered indispensable. By the integration of these two lists, the personnel complement of the new organization was chosen.

The personnel complement for the eight boats consisted of approximately 120 officers and men. Included in the roster of seventeen officers were sixteen line officers and one Disbursing Officer. No Medical Officer or other officer specialists were available. In view of the shortage of line officers both the Squadron Commander and the Executive Officer assumed additional duty as boat captains.

With the division of Squadron TWO into two groups, one of eight boats and one of six boats, the Squadron Commander was informed that the six-boat group would remain under the jurisdiction of the Panama Sea Frontier, and, further, that it would not be transferred to the combat area at a later date.³ With this factor in mind, it was decided that any excess of spare parts should be transferred to the eight-boat group, that the six-boat group would retain only the minimum allowance of spare parts. There was an abundance of ordnance spares, as these were standard Navy items; however, the supply of engineering and hull spares was very critical and considerable deliberation was required to provide an equitable distribution. The date of this division of spare parts probably marked the beginning of the Era of Paucity for engineering and hull spares. These items remained critical for the duration of the war.

As has been previously indicated, there was no immediate information relative to the administrative designation of the two groups of boats. After considerable discussion and not a little confusion, CNO directed that the six-boat group which was to remain in the Panama Sea Frontier would retain the designation Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron TWO, and that the eight-boat group which was to proceed to the combat area would assume the designation Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron THREE. This arrangement was somewhat shy of a panacea for administrative confusion inasmuch as the original Squadron THREE⁴ had never been formally decommissioned. Although all the boats of this group had been lost or destroyed early in the war, this squadron was still carried on the books of the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts. Therefore, with two squadrons designated as Motor Boat Squadron THREE, a certain degree of administrative confusion was inevitable.

³ This plan was later modified

⁴ The original Ron 3 had been stationed in the Philippines at the time of the outbreak of hostilities and had been commanded by Lt. (jg) John D. Bulkeley, USN.

The confusion engendered by this identical nomenclature lasted long after the newly designated Squadron THREE sailed from Panama. One example occurred when the new squadron requested its commissioning allotment. The Bureau partly informed the squadron that one commissioning allotment had already been granted to Squadron THREE in 1941, and that it was not the policy of the Navy Department to grant more than one commissioning allotment to any one command. All in all, the selection of some number other than "THREE" would have proved more expeditious and less confusing.

During July and August, 1942 the preparations were completed for the loading of the boats of Squadron THREE for transshipment. The first division was loaded aboard the USS TAPPAHANNOCK and the USS LACKAWANNA, each tanker carrying two boats, while the entire second division was loaded aboard a merchant ship.

On 1 September 1942 the first division departed from Panama en route for Noumea, New Caledonia; the second division followed in approximately two weeks. After an uneventful voyage, the first division arrived at its destination on 18 September, and the first of myriad difficulties was encountered in unloading the boats from the tankers. Prior to the departure of the squadron from Panama a tremendous volume of dispatches had been devoted solely to a discussion of this very problem. Other commands, which had been concerned in this prospective operation had been unfamiliar with the characteristics of the craft. This lack of knowledge had produced a plethora of recommendations that had ranged from the impractical to the impossible.

Finally, it was decided that a stiff-leg crane mounted on a pontoon barge would be utilized to unload the boats. After two days of experimentation and improvisation the SeaBees were successful in off-loading the first motor torpedo boat with only minor damage to the superstructure of the craft. The remaining boats were off-loaded without damage.

Fortunately, the USS JAMESTOWN (AGP-3), a yacht which had been converted and had been designated as a MTB tender, arrived in Noumea at this time and was able to provide limited tender facilities for the boats during the time the first division remained in Noumea. In this interim the boats were painted a weird combination of red, green and yellow to conform with the camouflage pattern in effect at that time for amphibious craft. Routine checks and minor repairs were also effected prior to the forward movement of the boats.

As previously stated, the motor torpedo boat was a weapon very new to our Navy, and no one on the ComSoPac Staff was exactly certain of its capabilities or its limitations. There was a general tendency, however, to consider this small group of boats as the answer to the nightly depredations of the "Bougainville Express".⁵ This viewpoint was somewhat overoptimistic; but it was the objective. Opinions differed as to the means of accomplishing this objective: Vice-Admiral Ghormley (ComSoPac) was in favor of the establishment of the main motor torpedo boat base at Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, and of the establishment of a temporary operating base in the Tulagi area of the Solomons. This plan was predicated on the assignment of six (6) boats to active patrol duty in the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area and two boats in overhaul and repair status at Santos. Every two weeks the boats would be rotated and

⁵ Later re-named the "Tokyo Express" by Admiral Halsey.

the two boats that had completed their repair and overhaul availability would proceed to Tulagi and relieve two of the boats which had been on active patrols. Although this plan would have provided rest and recreation for personnel and better repair facilities, it was abandoned after considerable discussion because of the excessive engine hours which the shuttle trips would have necessitated and because of the inability to effect any major repairs to the boats at Tulagi if only a temporary base was established there.

Rear Admiral R. K. Turner, USN, who was at that time Commander Task Force 62, recommended that the entire squadron be stationed in the Tulagi area and that an MTB base be established on Gavutu Island in Tulagi Harbor. (This island was formerly the site of a Japanese submarine base.) This plan was approved by ComSoPac and in late September an officer of Squadron THREE was directed to proceed to Guadalcanal and report to Major General Vandegrift, Commanding General First Marine Division Reenforced, and further, to make the necessary arrangements for the establishment of the MTB base.

Rumors were rampant on Guadalcanal concerning the prospective arrival of motor torpedo boats. Needless to say, the relatively unopposed shelling of Guadalcanal by Japanese surface ships had a disturbing effect on the morale of the men who were the recipients of these periodic nightly bombardments. The word that an officer attached to motor torpedo boats had arrived on the island travelled rapidly, and a feeling of over-optimism once again swept through the rank and file. General Vandegrift was cognizant of this wave of optimism, but he realized that it would be virtually impossible for one squadron of motor torpedo boats to derail the "Bougainville Express". Nonetheless, that was the task that had to be accomplished. He stated that he had no intention of exercising operational control of the squadron, but rather, that the squadron commander would formulate his own operational policy and would direct every effort toward the destruction of the "Bougainville Express".

Shortly thereafter, the MTB emissary, accompanied by a Commander Compton, the officer-in-charge of naval construction in the area, proceeded to Tulagi and reported to Brigadier General Rupertus (Assistant Division Commander First Marine Division Reenforced). A brief investigation of Gavutu Island resulted in its immediate elimination as a prospective site for the MTB base. The island had been completely devastated; it was considered too vulnerable to bombardment from the sea and to attack from the air; it provided little opportunity for concealment of installations from aerial reconnaissance. Of primary consideration, however, was the presence of numerous partially exposed and partially decomposed bodies of Japs who had been killed during the initial landings in the area.

After further preliminary reconnaissance, a small cove which was located on the northwestern side of Tulagi Island was selected as the site for the MTB base. Prior to the Japanese occupation this site, which was known as Sesapi, had been the center of the local "shipbuilding" industry. However, little remained of what was once a thriving native establishment; the dock had been burned to the waterline; the marine railways had been wrecked; and the native buildings had been shelled. Nonetheless, Sesapi offered distinct advantages over other sites in the nearby area: it was relatively immune from the danger of infantry attack; it was sufficiently removed from the main harbor area to avoid congestion and interference with other activities; it was protected from wind and sea; it offered better anti-aircraft

protection than Gavutu; it was closer to logical dispersal points for the boats; and natural geographic barriers made shelling of the site from the sea virtually impossible.

The selection of the new site met with the approval of Admiral Turner and immediate action was initiated to establish temporary facilities. A large native shack was taken over for use as a warehouse and as an engineering shop. Another smaller shack, which boasted a deck made of 3" teakwood planks, was transformed into the administration building. Improvisation was the keynote; materials for new construction were not available and manpower was at a premium.

On 10 October 1942 the USS FULLER (APA-10) arrived at Tulagi with the first shipment of squadron spares. The unloading of these spares was complicated by the fact that the Marine garrison on Tulagi had been cut to the irreducible minimum and no personnel were available for working parties. The task of unloading the Higgins boats fell to the lot of the MTB emissary and the three enlisted men who had accompanied the shipment of spares. This is the only known time in the history of MTB's wherein the spares arrived prior to the boats, but any jubilation that this situation caused was short-lived. A thorough investigation of the spares and supplies that had arrived revealed that the bulk of the cargo was of the toilet-paper-salt water soap variety; critical items—engineering spares, electronics spares, propellers, shafts, etc.—had not been shipped from Noumea.

[PT boats arrive at Tulagi]

The first four boats of Squadron THREE accompanied by two DMS's arrived at Tulagi at dawn on the morning of 12 October 1942. It had been the original intention to tow the boats from Noumea to Tulagi via Espiritu Santo in order to obviate the necessity for fueling at sea and to conserve the stocks of 100-octane gasoline, a most critical fuel in the Guadalcanal area. The towing operation had proved feasible on the first leg of the trip and the two DMS's departed Santo, each with two motor torpedo boats in tow. However, the DMS's experienced difficulty in adhering to their operational schedule because of the limitations imposed upon their speed by the tows, and it was necessary to cast the boats loose and direct them to proceed under own power at increased speed in company with the DMS's to ensure their arrival at Tulagi during the hours of darkness.

The situation on Guadalcanal was critical and the boats began patrolling the waters of Iron Bottom Bay the night of their arrival. When the second division of Squadron THREE arrived at Tulagi at dawn on 25 October, the tempo of operations increased accordingly. The scope of these operations was not limited to patrols, but it also embraced courier duties, escort duties, and even an attempt to tow a damaged DD.⁶ However, the principal mission of the boats at this time was to intercept the enemy destroyers and transports (The "Bougainville Express") which came down "The Slot",⁷ and with which the enemy strove to reinforce its position on Guadalcanal.

Daily air reconnaissance of "The Slot", the Buin-Faisi-Shortland and the Rabaul areas often gave warning of impending Jap forays against Guadalcanal. However, when the "Bougainville Express" started its run

⁶ USS McFarland

⁷ The passage running down the middle of the Solomon Islands

down “The Slot”, the Japs took every advantage of the cloud formation that hung low over the passage and endeavored to remain at the greatest possible range from Guadalcanal during the hours of daylight. In this manner, they hoped to reduce the possibility of interception and attack by Allied air forces. By evening, the results of Allied interception, if any, had been compiled. This information was compared with the late reports from the coastwatchers who were stationed on the islands which flanked “The Slot”, and the final report was forwarded to the MTB’s. As the condition of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal precluded its use by planes for night attacks against the “Bougainville Express”, and if major Allied surface forces were not available, the night’s operation for the MTB’s was obvious. Occasionally, a PBY would be assigned to spot for the boats.⁸

The geographic nature of Iron Bottom Bay lent itself to motor torpedo boat attacks. The entrances into the bay between Cape Esperance and Savo Island and between Savo Island and Sandfly Passage (Florida Island) were relatively narrow. Furthermore, the confinement of the Japanese forces to the area between Kukum and Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal left little doubt as to the ultimate destination of the enemy task forces. This situation simplified the task of establishing MTB patrol areas.

On nights when the “Bougainville Express” was expected, and if sufficient boats were available, patrols were established between Cape Esperance and Lunga Point,⁹ between Cape Esperance and Savo Island, between Savo Island and Sandfly Passage, and between Tulagi and Lunga Point (to cover Sealark and Lengo Channels to the south). These patrols would attempt to make contact with the enemy and then relay the necessary information to the MTB striking force which lay in wait behind Savo Island. After this information had been relayed, the patrol force which had made the report was free to attack. In view of the absence of spotting aircraft and of radar-equipped MTB’s, this system was the only means available to provide up-to-the-minute information on enemy disposition, course, and speed.

The lack of information relative to the possible presence of friendly surface forces in the area and the difficulty experienced by the motor torpedo boat personnel in distinguishing between other friendly surface forces and enemy surface forces rendered motor torpedo boat participation in major battles inadvisable. The boats were not equipped with radar and IFF, and the use of visual challenges by a craft which depended upon stealth to achieve success was impractical. In the event that a major surface engagement was imminent, the MTB’s were assigned certain passages or sectors to guard and were directed to prevent the retirement or escape of enemy forces through that area. However, the failure of the MTB’s to receive “the word” of changes in battle plans resulted in inevitable confusion, and several times, in near tragedy.

During a November battle, the USS PORTLAND was damaged and sought refuge in Tulagi Harbor. An MTB had been stationed off the entrance to Tulagi Harbor and the boat captain had been instructed that any vessel that approached was to be considered an enemy ship. As this order was never countermanded, when the PORTLAND approached the harbor entrance the motor torpedo boat, without further ado, made an attack. Fortunately, the boat captain overestimated the speed of the

⁸ Later, this became common practice.

⁹ On Guadalcanal

crippled PORTLAND and all four torpedoes passed ahead. This unfortunate incident, however, served to emphasize the need for better communications.

Later, a recurrence of this incident was avoided by the prompt action of a task force commander. Reports had been received that the Japs would make a strong bid to reinforce Guadalcanal. Available information indicated a slight possibility that a friendly task force might be in the area in time to engage the enemy. However, as this was uncertain, the MTB's were ordered out to pierce "the destroyer and cruiser screens and get the transports". Only three MTB's were in operation. They proceeded to a point off the northwestern tip of Guadalcanal, and there, under the command of the Squadron Commander, Lt. H. M. Robinson, USN, they lay in wait for the Japs. Eventually, a task force appeared on the horizon, and as the boat captains endeavored to determine whether it was friend or enemy, a voice cut in on the MTB voice circuit and said, "This is Ching Chong China Lee! Get out of my way! I'm coming through!" Thus, did Admiral Lee avoid another PORTLAND incident. The result of the ensuing engagement between Admiral Lee's task force and the Japs is history, but the boats' participation in it was limited to witnessing the spectacle and to picking up survivors.

The ultimate damage in enemy tonnage sunk by motor torpedo boats during the early Solomons campaign has long been in dispute, but the MTB's did contribute in a large fashion to the harassment and disruption of the enemy's efforts to supply the beleaguered Japs on Guadalcanal.

The story of the Guadalcanal campaign is well known; the difficulties which were experienced by the motor torpedo boat personnel were common to all the Allied forces which participated in this campaign. The myriad problems of inadequate quarters and hospital facilities, and of insufficient personnel were met with improvisation and ingenuity.

The arrival of the JAMESTOWN at Tulagi on or about 20 October provided only partial relief; the facilities of this tender were grossly inadequate. The repair shops were cramped and incomplete; there were no facilities for hauling MTB's; gasoline capacity was limited to 23,000 gallons; storage space was non-existent; fresh water capacity was insufficient to provide water for more than the tender personnel; and quarters for squadron personnel were inadequate. The ship was equipped with a small sick-bay and with limited medical facilities. The messing facilities aboard the JAMESTOWN were also inadequate, but she was equipped to carry a 30-day supply of frozen meat, a rare delicacy in the area. It was obvious that the shore-based facilities would have to be substantial if more than one squadron was to operate in the area.

One of the first units set up on the beach was the radio shack, as the value of the communication facilities aboard the JAMESTOWN were nullified by the location of the ships mooring along the bank of the Maliali River; the high hills in the immediate background blocked radio transmission between the ship and the boats on patrol. The inability of the JAMESTOWN to handle local radio traffic necessitated the establishment of additional facilities. The Marine Headquarters on Tulagi was able to relay a resume of the intelligence information which had been obtained by the Marine Headquarters on Guadalcanal from the coastwatchers, air reconnaissance and other sources, but facilities were inadequate to maintain constant communication with the motor torpedo boats on patrol. A temporary solution to this

problem was obtained by the use of a TCS radio which had been set up by the naval personnel stationed at Government Wharf. With the arrival of additional equipment the motor torpedo boat personnel established their own communication facilities at Sesapi.

The limited supply of 100-octane gasoline posed a serious problem. It was necessary to divide available supplies between the motor torpedo boats on Tulagi and the planes on Guadalcanal; this often necessitated transferring gasoline in drums from Tulagi to Guadalcanal. After the JAMESTOWN's meagre gasoline supply had been exhausted, the boats were refueled either from 55-gallon drums or from the 1000-gallon rubber gasoline buoys at the so-called Naval Air Station, Tananbogo, which had been established as a float plane refuge, but whose facilities were limited to one dilapidated shack, one officer and the gasoline buoys.

The gasoline that was available in the Tulagi-Guadalcanal area was often contaminated and refueling became a slow and laborious process. Impurities, and more particularly salt water, played havoc with the boats' fuel systems. The lack of adequate facilities for steaming gasoline tanks increased the difficulties. An attempt was made to obtain gasoline from the USS McFARLAND after she had limped into Tulagi Harbor. However, the gasoline system had been damaged during an engagement with Japanese planes, and the first and only boat to fuel from the ship obtained a large amount of salt water in lieu of gasoline.

The lack of facilities for servicing torpedoes posed still another problem. There was no air compressor in the area; the JAMESTOWN's compressor was inoperative. Because of the lack of adequate facilities Squadron THREE requested the rear areas to ship torpedo re-loads in a "ready" condition, the BuOrd Manual notwithstanding. The torpedoes were shipped to Tulagi on board APD's; but, they were not shipped in a "ready" condition, and thus, were of no value to the squadron until such time as an air compressor became available. As many months were to pass before an air compressor was set up in the area, the squadrons were dependent upon such destroyer and cruisers as sought refuge in Tulagi Harbor while licking their battle wounds; the first of these was the USS PORTLAND.

Maintenance of equipment was a problem from the outset. Spare parts were virtually non-existent. Few of the spares that Squadron THREE had brought from Panama to Noumea ever reached Tulagi; many of them were lost in transit or were cannibalized by other commands. Improper handling of delicate equipment often resulted in the damage or destruction of equipment that was shipped. Damage suffered by the SS GEORGE HINES while unloading at Guadalcanal resulted in the immersion in salt water of 42 new Packard engines—80% of the SoPac allotment of spare engines.

The coral reefs and nigger-heads that infested the poorly-charted waters of the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area soon left their imprint on propellers, shafts, rudders, and planking. Since there were no drydocking facilities available, repairs were limited to those which could be effected with the use of shallow-water diving outfits. If replacement parts were necessary but were not available, or if the damage was too extensive, the boat would be tied up to the dock or beached and used as a spare parts kit.

Shipping space was at a premium, and the early motor torpedo boat units had difficulty in obtaining an allocation of cargo space. In dire emergencies, planes and APD's were pressed into service to carry

gasoline, ammunition and torpedoes to Tulagi. The more mundane items—engineering spares, hull spares, electronics spares, etc.—became scattered about Noumea and Santo, and when shipping space was allocated, the lack of familiarity with motor torpedo boat requirements on the part of the personnel in the rear areas, often resulted in shipment of non-priority equipment.

These factors, when coupled with heavy operational demands and the lack of sufficient personnel, resulted in a progressive deterioration of equipment.

It was apparent from the outset that the original complement of Squadron THREE¹⁰ was woefully inadequate. There were barely enough personnel to man the boats without taking into consideration the need for personnel to operate vital base facilities. Boat crews rapidly approached the fatigue state; the constant strain of nightly patrols and the necessity for the boat crews to forego sufficient rest during the daytime in order to effect proper maintenance on their own boat and prepare it for action on the subsequent night rendered each individual an easy prey to malaria, dengue fever, and other tropical diseases. The boat engineers suffered varying degrees of carbon monoxide and lead poisoning which were caused by defective exhaust mufflers which could not be repaired and for which there were no replacements available.¹¹ Furthermore, the arrival of additional squadrons would in no way alleviate this situation. The new squadrons were as limited in complement as Squadron THREE, and their presence would only add to the burden of the maintenance problems.

Trained MTB personnel were not available in the area, and the graduates of the Motor Torpedo Boat Training Center, Melville, Rhode Island, were all needed for new construction. A partial solution to the manpower problem was obtained in the acquisition of officer and enlisted personnel from other units which were stationed in the South Pacific Area. The majority of these men were survivors of the WASP, the ATLANTA, and other ships which had been sunk in nearby actions. There was no opportunity to establish a formal training program to familiarize these men with MTB's, and they were immediately assigned to boats on combat patrols. Such indoctrinations were frequently rather hectic, but this process speeded up their orientation immeasurably. In a short time it was possible to remove the more experienced personnel from the boats and establish a small experienced base force maintenance crew.

Unknown to the MTB command at Tulagi, the first echelon of MTB Base One had arrived in the South Pacific area. This base unit consisted of 4 officers, 22 enlisted men, base equipment and MTB spares, manpower and equipment which were vitally needed at Tulagi. The materiel had been unloaded at Espiritu Santo in apparent conformity with the original plan to establish the major MTB base there. However, when MTB's had been assigned to Commander Task Force 62, he apparently had not been informed by ComSoPac of the presence of this base unit. Much of the base equipment was soon cannibalized by other commands at Espiritu Santo, while the MTB spares deteriorated on the beach. The four officers, all specialists in MTB maintenance, were assigned duty with the Port Director and other local commands. The 22 enlisted men remained in Noumea. Eventually, the remnants of the materiel and the personnel were collected and assimilated by the MTB command.

¹⁰ 120 officers and men.

¹¹ Continuous operation of these mufflers while the boats were on patrol was essential to avoid detection.

Little did the personnel of Squadron THREE realize while they were fighting malaria, logistics, and Japs in the Solomons that they would soon be reunited with their former shipmates in Squadron TWO, the group that had remained in Panama. Simultaneously with the departure of Squadron THREE from Panama, Squadron TWO had been alerted for movement to the Galapagos Islands. A seaplane tender had been assigned to serve as an escort and to refuel the boats en route. However, the night before the scheduled departure the movement had been indefinitely postponed; a wolf-pack of German submarines had been wreaking havoc on merchant shipping in the Caribbean and the sonic-gear-equipped seaplane tender had been ordered to aid in combatting this menace.

At the same time, the first division of Squadron FIVE had arrived at Balboa, C. Z., with the first of the new 80-foot Elco boats. This squadron had experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining maximum performance from the new type; the "bugs" had not been worked out. Spares were even more critical than for the 77-foot class. Furthermore, the squadron had been hastily formed and the personnel were exceptionally "green".

With these factors in mind, the previous orders were countermanded; Lt. R. E. Westholm, USN, was detached as Squadron Commander of the newly commissioned Squadron SEVEN on or about 20 September and was ordered to assume command of Squadron TWO; six 80-foot boats (MTB's 109-114) were transferred from Squadron FIVE to Squadron TWO on 22 September; and the reorganized squadron was immediately alerted for forward movement.

This change in orders placed Squadron TWO in an unenviable position. As has been previously stated, Squadron THREE had departed from Panama with the "loin's share" of the spare parts under the assumption that Squadron TWO would remain there. Furthermore, the 77-foot boats of Squadron TWO were in need of complete overhaul. Nonetheless, Squadron TWO picked up the remnants, patched up the wrecks and departed for the combat area. The first division arrived at Tulagi on or about 20 November 1942; the second followed shortly thereafter.

[Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla ONE]

Even with the arrival of Squadron TWO the MTB organization at Sesapi remained relatively small, but the illness and subsequent evacuation of LT. Cmdr. Montgomery had left the organization with a Lieutenant, USN, as the senior ranking officer. It was apparent that additional squadrons would shortly be assigned to operate in the Solomons area and that there was a need for a higher-ranking officer and an over-all MTB command. Thus, on 15 December 1942 Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla ONE was activated with headquarters at Sesapi; Commander Allen P. Calvert, USN, was directed to assume command of the new organization. Direct operational control of MTBFlot ONE was exercised by Commander Naval Base Guadalcanal.

On 31 December 1942 the forces of the new command were augmented by the arrival of Division 16 which was comprised of the first four boats (80-foot Elco type) of Squadron SIX. This Squadron had been split upon its arrival at Noumea; the first division (Division 16) had been assigned to the SoPac area

and the second division (Division 17) to the New Guinea area.¹² The third division (Division 18) had been assigned to the Solomons area, but it did not arrive at Tulagi until the middle of February 1943, too late to participate in the last major engagement between the MTB's and the "Bougainville Express".

Shortly after the capture of Guadalcanal, Squadron TWO, under the command of Lt. A. H. Harris, USNR, moved into the Russell Islands with the initial landing. Technically, CNOB Russells exercised direct operational control of this squadron, but operational orders were often received direct from the Commanding General Russells. With the exception of one bombing attack these boats met no opposition; patrols up and down "The Slot" were negative. Their most valuable contribution was the frequent reconnaissance trips which were made in preparation for the New Georgia campaign.

Prior to the invasion of the Russells a site for an MTB base had been selected on Renard Sound. However, upon closer inspection this site proved to be untenable and a new site was selected on the banks of Sunlight Channel. The construction of this base was solely an MTB project, and thus, the facilities were limited to that equipment which could be carried on the boats plus 50 tons of additional gear which was towed up to the Russells from Tulagi on a barge at a later date.

An open air galley was set up on the beach, but later it was replaced by a plantation house which was appropriated for use as a common galley for MTB personnel, Marine gun crews, and a few Army personnel who were stationed nearby. All MTB personnel lived ashore in tents which had been obtained from the base at Sesapi. Fresh water was a considerable problem. Whenever possible water was obtained from larger ships in the harbor, but most of the time rain-water which was caught from the roofs of the plantation houses was the sole source of supply. Fuel was obtainable only in 55-gallon drums which were shipped from Guadalcanal in LCT's. Repair facilities were non-existent. This new base, inadequate as it was, was the first of many which were to be established as the MTB's accompanied the forward march of the Allied ground forces through the Central and Northern Solomons.

Three weeks after the initial landing Divisions 16 and 18 were assigned to the Russells and Lt. C. W. Faulkner, USNR, relieved Lt. Harris as Area Commander. By this time MTB's were being staged for the New Georgia campaign and, with the arrival of Squadron NINE in the area, Lt. Comdr. R. B. Kelly, USN, relieved Lt. Faulkner as Area Commander. Immediately prior to the New Georgia invasion, a small group of Squadron THREE boats were assigned to augment the forces in the Russells and with the departure of the original units Lt. J. M. Searles, USNR, assumed command.

With the arrival of new squadrons at Tulagi and with the subsequent expansion of the MTB operations, the spare parts situation became even more critical. Although many spares were common to both the Elco 77-foot and the Elco 80-foot classes, differences in hull design obviously increased the burden of maintenance. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the new squadrons arrived in the area equipped with only those spares which could be brought to the forward areas on the boats. The

¹² Div 17 was augmented by the addition of two Squadron TWO boats (PT's 113 and 114) prior to the division's departure for New Guinea.

remainder of the equipment usually was left in Noumea for transshipment, but rarely did it ever reach the squadron again.

For example, Squadron TWO's spares had been off-loaded at Noumea for transshipment to the squadron at a later date. Prior to the shipment, however, Division 17 had arrived at Noumea and had received orders to proceed to the New Guinea area. They apparently had been short of spare parts and the presence of Squadron TWO's spares had seemed the obvious solution; they attempted to appropriate the larger portion of them. However, in transferring the gear, the pontoon barge was overloaded and it capsized. Critical spares, motors, shafts, etc., were consigned to the bottom of the harbor. Sometime later, after Division 17 had departed Noumea, divers located much of the gear and picked it up. It was later shipped to Tulagi, but all of the aluminum parts were corroded beyond repair, and all the spare engines were severely damaged.

Confusion was general in matters relating to spare parts. There was no coordination among commissioning details, BuShips, and operating squadrons. Commissioning details attempted to conform to the allowance lists which had been furnished by BuShips. These lists were often obsolete and were not based on usage factors. On the other hand, the MTB Maintenance Desk in BuShips was understaffed and lacked experienced MTB personnel who were familiar with actual MTB combat operations or maintenance problems. Production of spares was limited, and oftentimes vital equipment was not available. Sufficient information was not available to enable BuShips to determine the usage factors and to establish an "automatic flow" of spare parts to the combat areas as the operating squadrons were preoccupied with combat operations and had little time for or little inclination toward the submission of detailed reports to BuShips. Multiplicity of requests, differences in terminology and description of spare parts, and disputes over the quantity to be supplied resulted in inevitable confusion and delay.

[Captain M. M. Dupre, Jr, temp. ComMTBRonsSoPac]

On 15 January 1943 ComSoPac attempted to bring order out of this chaos; the Commander Naval Bases, South Pacific, Captain M. M. Dupre, Jr., USN, was directed to assume temporary additional duty as Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons, South Pacific (Administrative). Although the investiture of these two commands in the person of Captain Dupre enforced a closer liaison between the MTB command and local naval base commands and although it ensured the consideration of MTB requirements in the construction of new bases, it did not prove to be the panacea for many of the logistic and administrative problems that confronted the operating forces. The assignment of the former Commander of Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron SIX, Lt. Comdr. B. Maddox, USN, as assistant to Captain Dupre eased the situation somewhat, but Lt. Comdr. Maddox had been detached from his previous duties upon his arrival at Noumea and he was not familiar with the specific details of the problems of the forward area.

Most of the MTB equipment was being shipped direct from the States or from the Canal Zone to Noumea for off-loading and ultimate transshipment. However, as the war moved further to the north and west some equipment was off-loaded at Espiritu Santo. Thus, the operating forces were faced with

the problem of vital equipment being off-loaded at two different bases far in the rear, with the administrative headquarters over 1000 miles behind the operating areas. The delays that were occasioned by this arrangement were evident even as late as 5 May 1943 when ComMTBRonsSoPac (Administrative) directed MTB Base THREE (which, by that time, had been established at Espiritu Santo) to "Advise arrival of all material by detailed list giving full information. . . Shipment of any and all material from EBON [Espiritu Santo] is to be done only upon authorization of this command".

In spite of these difficulties considerable headway was made toward the establishment of MTB bases. The original plans called for the establishment of bases at Samoa, Nandi, Tongatabu, Noumea, Espiritu Santo, Santa Cruz. Base THREE which had been designated a Major Engine Overhaul (MEO) Base was offloaded at Nandi, Fiji Islands, in November 1942. Base ONE had been off-loaded at Espiritu Santo and Base TWO was sent forward to Tulagi from Noumea. The first echelon of Base TWO which consisted of 5 officers, 110 men and 100 tons of base gear arrived at Tulagi on 20 December. The second echelon, and an additional 2200 tons of gear, arrived in February 1943.

Half of the materiel and personnel of Base ONE was sent to Tulagi from Espiritu Santo to supplement Base TWO in March 1943. Base THREE remained at Espiritu Santo and was augmented by the other half of Base ONE and in April it began to function as an MEO. By the first of May the Santo base was overhauling approximately 10-12 engines per month.¹³ By November 1943 the base was operating at its full capacity of 54 engines per month.

As mentioned hereinbefore, Squadron NINE arrived in the area and was moved up to the Russells. The exact date of its arrival is not known but an entry in the War Diary of the USS STRATFORD¹⁴ for 26 May 1943 reveals that the PT 156, a Squadron NINE boat, was tied alongside to effect minor repairs and to steam its fuel tanks.

The date of the arrival of Squadron FIVE is even more inconclusive. However, it is apparent that Squadron NINE had overtaken Squadron FIVE and had arrived in the area approximately a month before Squadron FIVE put in a much belated appearance. It is believed that Squadron FIVE did not make any patrols until after the opening of the Rendova campaign when this squadron augmented Squadron NINE and Commander Henry Farrow, USN, relieved Lt. Comdr. Kelly as ComMTB's Rendova. First reference to Squadron FIVE is contained in an action report in an unidentified MTB history concerning a clash between a Squadron FIVE boat (PT 104) and Jap planes on 16 June. Before the action ended, the MTB which was acting as courier boat between Guadalcanal and Tulagi downed two Jap Zeros.

[war patrols at Tulagi end]

With the exception of occasional bombings, the enemy did not risk further attacks on Guadalcanal, and patrols from Tulagi as well as the Russells were only routine security patrols. Finally, on 6 July 1943, "the patrols from Tulagi were abandoned and Rendova-based boats continued war patrols against the

¹³ During the first part of May 1943 the designations of Bases 2 and 3 were reversed; the base at Tulagi became MTB Base 3, and the base at Espiritu Santo, MTB Base 2. The reason for this change is not known.

¹⁴ A converted Panama steamer which was later used for carrying both MTB personnel and equipment in shuttle trips between islands.

enemy in the New Georgia Campaign. Thereafter, the Tulagi MTB base was used for servicing the boats that were operating in the forward area.”¹⁵

[shift of PT boat mission to destroying barges]

“The establishment of a Motor Torpedo Boat Base at Rendova Harbor, Rendova Island, on 30 June-1 July was only the first step in smashing the enemy barge supply routes in the New Georgia campaign. The Allied air and surface superiority prevented the enemy from employing large surface units in supplying their troops on New Georgia, Kolombangara, Arundel, Gizo, and the small neighboring islands.”

“The enemy was therefore forced to rely upon their barges and other small craft for transporting troops, ammunition, food, and other essential supplies to their bases. The advantage of using barges for this purpose was apparent. They were relatively expendable; they could very easily be hidden along reef-fringed coast lines where heavy tropical foliage aided camouflage. They could operate in waters inaccessible to ships of larger draft. They were ideal for servicing small outposts. They were easy to keep in repair, and at a base were invaluable for unloading submarines or transports. Due to the barges’ vulnerability to attack by aircraft, the enemy was forced to rely upon deception. The barge operators became ingenious in the use of camouflage by day, but most often resorted to silent blackout travel by night, and, if possible, when there was little moon.”

“The barges operated along definite routes which were chosen to take advantage of the shallow draft of the barges in crossing mine fields, and reefs, and employing small rivers and inlets as hiding and resting places. The enemy quickly learned to develop shore batteries to protect these routes. This was particularly evident along the Kolombangara coastline. Barges, hugging the coastline, would duck into coves and inlets, while shore batteries would open fire whenever motor torpedo boats appeared.”

[first barge contact 21 July 1943]

Although the New Georgia campaign for the MTB’s consisted principally of liquidating barge traffic, the first actions were minor shades of the Guadalcanal campaign. There were two actions with Japanese destroyers before the first barge contact on 21 July, followed by two more destroyer-MTB actions within eight days: three enemy destroyers were contacted on the 23rd of July and five were encountered on the night of 1-2 August. In the latter action the PT 109 was bisected by a Japanese destroyer.

[armored barges]

The first contact with barges which were both armed and armored occurred in the next few days. The inadequacy of the MTB fire power, four 50-caliber machine guns and a 20mm cannon, was soon evident when the machine gun bullets seemingly ricocheted off the armored plates along the side of the low silhouetted barges. At the same time the light MTB armament could not match the superior fire power of the enemy. This period marked the turning point in the transition of the motor torpedo boat into the hybrid motor torpedo boat-motor gunboat.

¹⁵ Excerpt from unidentified history of Northern Solomons campaign. Unless otherwise identified, all of the following quotations will be excerpts from the same history.

The MTB's first experimented with lashing down a cumbersome single shot 37mm field piece on the bow of the boat. The gun was bolted to the deck and further braced by coconut log-stringers. Later, an M4-37mm aircraft gun of the type mounted in the nose of P-39's was obtained. A crude mount was fashioned and the entire assembly was mounted on the bow of the boat. This weapon was not a panacea for armored barges but it proved to be the best improvised weapon available. MTB personnel were thereafter haunting friendly air fields for 37mm guns, magazines, and ammunition, inasmuch as this weapon was not supplied through Navy Ordnance and was not included as standard equipment by the Bureau of Ordnance until late 1944.

Prior to the Rendova-Munda invasion, Lombari Island, a small island immediately north of Rendova, had been selected as the tentative site for the MTB base, and on "D" Day, Squadron NINE arrived to set up temporary headquarters on this island. On or about 8 July, Squadron FIVE arrived at Rendova, followed by Squadron TEN during the latter part of July and eight boats of Squadron ELEVEN before the end of August. Lombari lacked many qualities of an ideal base, and with the arrival of additional squadrons the existing facilities proved to be inadequate. When it was decided to augment the existing facilities with MTB Base ELEVEN in October 1943, Bau Island, a few hundred yards to the east of Lombari, was selected as the new base site.

The Jap air strength was not neutralized when the Rendova campaign was initiated, and air raids were numerous during the first two months. The enemy bombers escaped radar detection by flying in over the southern tip of Rendova, ascending into the ever-present clouds over Mount Rendova and then diving down out of the sun, unloading their bombs over the MTB base on Lombari, and then finishing their run over the Munda air strip, a few miles to the north. The Jap bombing efforts were somewhat erratic except for one instance on 1 August when they scored a bomb hit on the temporary dock at Lombari Island. Two boats (PT's 117 and 164) were destroyed.

Although additional MTB squadrons and supplies were now arriving in the SoPac area, there was still a critical shortage of boats and spares to fulfill combat demands. For example, on 8 July, shortly after Squadron ELEVEN had arrived in Noumea, four of its twelve boats were reassigned as Squadron 11-2 which was directed to relieve Division 2 of Squadron ONE at Funafuti in the Ellice Islands. In answer to ComMTBRonsSoPac's request that reconsideration be given this order inasmuch as the boats were sorely needed in the combat area, ComSoPac¹⁶ dispatched a curt "Negative".

"While operations continued at Rendova it was soon evident that the boats could cover the west coast of New Georgia and the neighboring Jap-held islands, but could not effectively patrol along the eastern coasts. Thus, it was necessary to establish a (new) base."

"The site chosen for the new base was Grasse Lagoon in Lever Harbor, located on the northeastern coast of New Georgia Island, and so situated that boats patrolling from that point could effectively cover the barge routes in the eastern part of the New Georgia area."

¹⁶ ComSoPac dispatch 230006 July 43.

“On Saturday, 24 July 1943, Lt. C. C. Smith with PT’s 126, 115, 116 and APc 28 met at Grasse Lagoon, Lever Harbor. The PT’s moored alongside the APc, transferred base personnel, ammunition, foodstuff, and all base equipment to it, and immediately went underway for patrol. The following day was spent in refueling the boats, finding moorings, establishing base defenses and preparing for another night patrol.”

“On July 26, Lt. Comdr. Kelly with PT’s 155, 156, and 160, joined the force stationed at Lever, and Lt. Comdr. Kelly relieved Lt. C. C. Smith as base commander.”

After an enemy contact on 3-4 August in which two barges were destroyed, patrols out of Lever were negative until the night of 16-17 August, when Lt. Comdr. Kelly and his MTB section sighted four armored barges off Bairoko, Kula Gulf. The MTB’s were forced to retire after inflicting only slight damage in the face of superior fire from the barges and from newly-installed shore batteries. The following evening Lt. Smith’s group contacted three large and five medium size barges one and one-half miles south of Vila, Kolombangara Island. Again no barges were observed to sink and the boats were again forced to withdraw because of shore batteries. The same evening the MTB’s were attacked by float planes who dropped two bombs but without injury to the boats or personnel.

In the remaining days of August the MTB’s encountered twenty-nine more barges along the barge route in the Bairoko-Arundel-Vila area which now was lined with shore batteries. These installations opened up whenever the MTB’s were within a mile of the coast.

As a counter-heckling measure, the enemy began using float planes which patrolled constantly in the areas in which the boats operated. “It was observed that the planes ‘homed’ on the radio transmissions from the boats, determining the boats’ position from the intensity of their transmission.” Although it is believed that the enemy never realized the effectiveness of their heckling, it was fortunate that the enemy did not have access to an unlimited number of float planes. Occasionally the float planes were successful in breaking up an MTB barge attack by bombing and strafing, but more frequently the presence of the float planes in the area merely hampered the operations of the MTB’s.

Gradually the contacts in this area dwindled to the point where it became unprofitable to keep the Lever Harbor base in operation, and on 1 November the patrols were secured and the base was rolled up.

During the month of September the patrols from the Rendova base were extended to include all of Vella LaVella and the western coast of Choiseul which made it necessary for some of the boats to proceed a distance of 120 to 150 miles to reach their station. This excessive distance prevented effective blockading of the barge traffic in the area; obviously the enemy barges could operate freely under the cover of darkness during the period when the MTB’s were en route to and from the patrol areas. To correct this situation, plans were laid for the establishment of an operating base on Vella LaVella. The site chosen for this new base was Lambu Lambu Cove which was located on the northeastern coast of Vella LaVella and which was well protected by a narrow reef-fringed channel and which was hidden by a dense jungle growth.

On 25 September 1943 Lt. Comdr. LeRoy Taylor, USN, in tactical command of seven MTB's and one APC, arrived at Lambu Lambu to establish the new operating base. Immediate action was taken to set up temporary facilities which included a floating drydock and the work continued without interruption until the evening of 26 September when sufficient facilities were established to enable the boats to commence patrolling.

Although the establishment of the base at Lambu Lambu fitted the general strategy of the war of attrition in the Northern Solomons, no barges were encountered until 15 November. In the meantime the boats were occupied with special missions and float planes.

After considerable heckling and harassing by the float planes, the boats obtained some measure of revenge on 13 October when one MTB section shot down an attacking float plane. Although the radioman aboard the plane committed hari-kari rather than be taken prisoner, the pilot was rescued from a watery grave and talked freely when interrogated by Intelligence officers

The float plane attacks continued, but a change of tactics by the MTB's on 18 October was effective in keeping the planes at a distance in some instances. By using a taut Vee or a close-interval column formation and an intense radar watch while patrolling, the boats were able frequently to concentrate their fire and drive off the planes before they maneuvered in position for a bombing run.

The Lambu Lambu campaign was only productive of three barge actions by the time the base closed on 17 December 1943, but the base did serve to initiate in combat patrolling two new squadrons, NINETEEN and TWENTY, the first Higgins squadrons in the area.

There was considerable shifting of squadrons and personnel from the outset of the campaign. Lt. A. H. Berndtson, USN, in command of a heterogeneous group of twelve boats from Squadrons FIVE, NINE, and TEN, relieved Lt. Comdr. Taylor as ComMTBRonsLambu on 23 October. Lt Berndtson was in turn relieved on 1 November by Lt. Comdr. R. H. Smith, USN, Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron NINETEEN, and when Squadron TWENTY arrived at Lambu Lambu on 1 November, the Squadron Commander, Lt. Comdr. G. R. Van Ness, USNR, relieved Lt. Comdr. Smith as CmMTBRonsLambu.

An order was received from CTF 31 to abandon the base on 14 December 1943 and remove all boats, equipment, and personnel to Treasury, but an unfortunate fire which resulted in the destruction of the PT 239 on the afternoon of 14 December prevented the rolling up of the base before 17 December 1943.

The Rendova, Lever Harbor and Lambu Lambu operations set the stage for the Treasury-Bougainville operations in the northern tip of the Solomons. The combination of MTB patrols, air superiority and strikes by other surface forces virtually isolated the scattered enemy forces in the Southern Solomons. The next Allied moves therefore were calculated to divide and to harass further the enemy garrisons on the northernmost of the Solomon Islands.

The occupation of the Treasury Islands occurred on 26-27 October 1943 when American and New Zealand troops landed and secured Mono and Stirling Islands. MTB Squadron NINE, under command of

Lt. Comdr. Kelly, moved in the following day with a limited amount of base gear. A temporary base was quickly set up on Stirling Island and the first patrols, which consisted of guarding the approaches of the Treasury Islands against counter-attack, were made the same evening.

With the establishment of a base at Treasury the MTB's were in a strategic position to blockade the areas around Southern Bougainville, the Shortlands, and the Choiseul Bay Area. Remnants of the enemy that had managed to escape from the New Georgia Islands to Choiseul were moving north on foot to the Choiseul Bay area where nightly barges shuttled them across the Bougainville Straits to Fauro Island, the Shortlands, and southwestern Bougainville.

The Allied assault at Cape Torokina on Bougainville followed on 1 November. The purpose of this strike was to wrest an area large enough to provide ample space and protection for a satisfactory airstrip. Once gained, our air arm could effectively neutralize Rabaul, the last great enemy bastion in the area, with its many nearby airstrips, and could prevent enemy ships from using Rabaul's excellent anchorages.

Cape Torokina, a point of land just north of Empress Augusta Bay, was selected as the site for the airstrip inasmuch as it was believed to be lightly defended by the enemy and was approximately equidistant from the Shortland Kahili area in the south and Buka Passage area to the north where there were concentrated the two strongest Japanese air and ground forces in the Northern Solomons.

Although the amphibious landing on 1 November was supported by cruisers and battleships as well as coordinated attacks upon enemy airfields by Allied land and carrier-based planes, our land troops encountered fierce resistance in establishing a beachhead on the verdant shores of Cape Torokina. Some of the bitterest fighting occurred on Puruata Island on the first day of the invasion. During the night of 2 November the enemy were cleared from that island. The following morning Commander Farrow and eight MTB's arrived from Stirling Island, the newly-established MTB base in the Treasury Islands.

A temporary operating base was set up and MTB's were used to assist in protecting the precarious Allied beachhead by patrolling ten miles north and ten miles south of Cape Torokina. Though there were not many barge contacts during the initial month, the boats and the base on Puruata Island were under the most constant and sustained bombing attacks ever encountered by SoPac MTB's. Beginning on the night of 5 November, the Cape Torokina beachhead was subjected to 33 air attacks before the end of the month. The battle for air supremacy reached its climax during November, and by December the tide had definitely turned in favor of the Allies. Bombing attacks on Cape Torokina soon became occasional "nuisance" raids.

Throughout November the MTB's at Torokina were not only utilized for nightly patrols, but on six separate occasions the boats landed and picked up Marine reconnaissance patrols on Bougainville and executed other special missions. On November 27 the MTB's rescued a "Jap-pressed" coast-watcher and his party from the vicinity of Cape Bon Bon on the northeast coast of New Ireland. On the afternoon of November 29, MTB's and LCI gunboats aided in the evacuation of 700 Marines which had been trapped by superior enemy forces.

In December both the Cape Torokina MTB's and those which were based on Stirling Island extended their barge-hunting activities and increased the number of barge contacts. The boats which were based on Puruata Island covered the area from Empress Augusta Bay to Buka Island, while those which operated from Treasury stretched their patrol areas from the southwestern coast of Bougainville, and later to the eastern coast of Bougainville.

Allied air superiority was manifested not only in decreased enemy bombing attacks, but also in the lessening intensity of float plane attacks on the patrolling MTB's. By using the information which had been gleaned from the Jap float plane pilot who had been captured during the Lambu Lambu campaign, the air arm neutralized the enemy seaplane anchorages and supply bases. Consequently, the MTB's were hampered less and less by float planes.

The growth of the stature of the MTB's in the Solomons had kept pace with the assemblage of Allied might and with the steady march up the long island chain. From the meager force and the limited facilities—four motor torpedo boats and one grass shack—with which Squadron THREE had initiated MTB operations on 12 October 1942, the MTB organization had been expanded until on 1 January 1944 it embraced 10 squadrons and numerous bases ranging in size from small temporary operating bases to major repair and engine overhaul bases. The MTB, alone, had undergone a metamorphosis from a true motor torpedo boat to a hybrid motor torpedo boat-motor gunboat; the hull design had been modified; new types had been placed in service; additional armament had been mounted; new electronic devices had been installed.

During this period of transition and expansion, numerous changes had been effected in the administration of MTB's. As has been previously indicated, MTBFlot ONE had been activated in December 1942 to handle the operation and administration of MTB's in the Tulagi-Guadalcanal area. However, this command had exercised a relatively limited degree of autonomy and it had served merely as a "middle man" for the MTB's which had operated in that area; ComMTBRonsSoPac (Admin) had exercised administrative control of the flotilla, while CNB Guadalcanal had exercised operational control. Furthermore, it will be remembered, that the boats which had been assigned to the Russells, while they had remained under the administrative control of ComMTBFlot ONE, had been placed under the direct operational control of CNOB Russells. Thus, when due consideration had been given the prospective expansion of the SoPac MTB activities, it had become apparent that a reorganization was necessary.

The lack of focus, the lack of centralized control had been apparent not only to ComSoPac, but also to the Navy Department. Thus, Comich directed that Captain E. J. Moran, USN, be given a "spot" promotion to Commodore and further, that he report to ComSoPac for duty as Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons, South Pacific Force. He reported on 23 July 1943 and assumed command that date, but he did not "relieve" (in the strict sense of the term) Captain M. M. Dupre as ComMTBRonsSoPac (Admin). Captain Dupre's assignment to temporary additional duty as ComMTBRonsSoPac (Admin) had been a matter of expediency and apparently had not been recognized in Washington.

ComSoPac had anticipated Commodore Moran's assumption of command and on 21 July 1943 he directed him to report to CTF 31 for temporary duty,¹⁷ presumably for orientation in SoPac MTB operations. However, there was no immediate change in the operational policy and CTF 31 continued to exercise operational control of SoPac MTB's through the local naval base commanders.¹⁸

After Commodore Moran had made an inspection of his new command, he initiated immediate action to move his headquarters nearer the operating areas. On 13 August 1942 [the year should be 1943] he secured the approval of ComSoPac for the transfer of his headquarters from Noumea to Espiritu Santo. Upon his arrival at MTB Base TWO, he effected an immediate reorganization of that unit in an effort to increase the output of the overhauled Packard engines. When this reorganization had been completed he moved his headquarters to Tulagi.

During the interim subsequent to Commodore Moran's assumption of command MTBFlot ONE had continued to function in a limited capacity. Combat operations had moved forward to the New Georgia area and Tulagi had become a staging and repair base. However, upon ComMTBRonsSoPac's arrival he once again set about to effect a complete reorganization. The base had been expanded far beyond the original conception and because of the lack of sufficient space at the original location it had become scattered throughout the entire northern end of Tulagi Harbor; the torpedo and gunnery shops on Sesapi; the living quarters at the native village on the Maliali River. An effort was made to consolidate existing facilities as much as possible but the primary objective of the reorganization was the eventual disestablishment of the MTBFlot ONE command, a matter which became fait accompli in the latter part of November 1943.

In the latter part of November 1943 Commander W. C. Specht, USN,¹⁹ arrived at Tulagi and reported for duty as Chief Staff Officer, MTBRonsSoPac. The Staff organization was completed and once again the headquarters were moved closer to the combat area, this time to Bau Island. Initial preparations for this move had been undertaken much earlier and had been the primary consideration which had governed the transfer of the Rendova area base from Lombari to Bau Island. A Construction Battalion had been assigned to clear the area and to assist in the construction of MTB Base ELEVEN which had been shipped forward to form the nucleus for a new headquarters.

During the five-month period in which Commodore Moran had been reorganizing the administrative and operational policies of the SoPac MTB command, a great deal of attention had been focused on the problem of logistics. Personnel who were thoroughly familiar with MTB maintenance, and more particularly combat maintenance, were assigned to the Logistics Section of the Staff and a concerted effort was made to eradicate the confusion that was extant among BuShips, combat units, and Service Forces.

¹⁷ ComSoPac dispatch 210017 July 43.

¹⁸ This matter will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter II.

¹⁹ Formerly Commander Motor Torpedo Boat Training Center, Melville, Rhode Island.

Thus, by 1 January 1944, after more than one year of motor torpedo boat operations in the Solomons, a vestige of order began to appear. The groundwork for an effective, vital and vigorous command had been laid; but the attainment of this objective was to be another matter.

[end of Part I]