

## AIR BASES IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

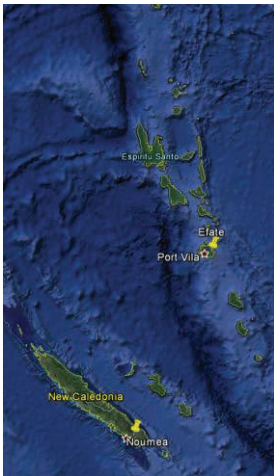
By one stroke on December 7, 1941, Japan seized the initiative in the Pacific. Long-made plans for offensive action by our Pacific Fleet in the event of war had to be discarded overnight. The enemy's military forces deployed with almost explosive speed throughout the western Pacific and an early counter-offensive was quite beyond the means of our Army and Navy. Furthermore, overall strategic considerations demanded that we direct our major strength against Germany before turning against Japan; in the Pacific we were forced to accept a defensive role, unsatisfying as well as hazardous.

Within a month after the Pearl Harbor attack our Pacific position was perilous. Our Pacific Fleet had been ruinously weakened; Guam and Wake had fallen to the enemy; the Philippines had been invested and there was no hope of sending them support; the British had lost Hong Kong, and Singapore was under siege; the Japanese had invaded the Dutch East Indies and there was no let-up in the progress of their conquest. To all intents and purposes they would win their war if they could continue their march until Australia and New Zealand were overrun.

Keeping open the line of communications with these two great bastions of the South Pacific was a strategic imperative. The northern route, southwest west from Hawaii, was already controlled by Japanese positions in the mandated islands. Only the southern route, via the South Sea Islands, was available for use. If we could hold it, future offensive operations would be possible. We would be able to build up our striking power in the South Pacific and when it was great enough we could attempt to wrest the initiative from the enemy.

But the line was long, 7,800 miles from Panama to Sydney, and only meagerly provided with supporting bases. Our tiny naval station in Samoa was wholly out of scale with the gigantic logistic problems that lay ahead, and would be almost negligible even upon completion of the modest expansion that was under way by civilian contract when the war broke out. A major asset, however, was the fact that the line of communication ran through an island-studded area of the Pacific, still wholly under the control of friendly powers.

**ESPIRITU SANTO** - When the Japanese moved into the Solomons and began construction of airfields on Guadalcanal, an Allied air base in an advance area became vital. The choice of **Espiritu Santo**, 630 miles southeast of Guadalcanal, in the New Hebrides, as a site for a major Army and Navy operating base, brought the U.S. bombers 400 miles closer to the Japanese positions and provided a staging area for the forthcoming Allied invasion of the Solomons. The base provided aircraft facilities capable of supporting heavy bombers, fighters, and two carrier groups; an accumulation of ammunition,



provisions, stores, and equipment for offensive operations; repair and salvage facilities for all types of vessels. It became a vital link between Henderson Field on Guadalcanal and the airfields at Noumea and Efate.

**Espiritu Santo** is the northernmost and largest of the New Hebrides islands. It has an irregular outline, with numerous small islands near its shores. Heavily wooded and mountainous, particularly in the south and west where the highest peak rises to more than 6000 feet, Santo, as it is locally known, is about 75 miles long and 45 miles wide. Like that of Efate, the government is under joint British and French control.

A small reconnaissance party of three men left Efate on June 28, 1942, to find an airfield site closer than Efate to Henderson Field. **Espiritu Santo** was chosen, and on July 8, a small group of Seabees of the Efate detachment arrived at Santo with a Marine anti-aircraft battery and a company of black infantrymen to begin work on Turtle Bay airfield.



The Santo pioneers were given twenty days in which to construct the field. They worked day and night, in the race against time. Equipment for heavy grading was not available and they had to make out with six tractors, two scrapers, one grease truck, one gas wagon, three weapon carriers, and one 50-kw generator. Assisting them were 295 infantrymen, 90 Marines, and 50 natives.

A 6000-foot runway was cleared and surfaced with coral in time to meet the deadline. On July 28, the first fighter squadron came in and was followed the next day by a squadron of B-17's. The planes were fueled from drums and gave the Japanese in Guadalcanal their first big bombing on July 30.

