

# ASCENSION ISLAND AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

DAVID FONTAINE MITCHELL

*“This is one of the strangest places on the face of the earth.”*  
- Captain William Burnett, Ascension Island Commandant, 1858



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PROLOGUE



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In March of 1942, one of the most remote islands in the world received a visit from the United States military. Situated in the South Atlantic, the island's existence was largely unknown, and both the U.S. and Britain wanted to keep it that way. A secret airfield was constructed by the 38<sup>th</sup> Engineers within the first 90 days of their arrival, and from thereafter aircraft taking off from Brazil had a place to refuel on their way to Africa, the Middle East, and the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater of operations. The island also contributed greatly to anti-submarine patrols in the South Atlantic, deterring U-boat activity across the region. Sadly overlooked by most history books and documentaries, this tiny landmass proved vital to the Allied campaign throughout the Second World War. This is the story of Ascension, truly "*one of the strangest places on the face of the earth.*"

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## THE ISLAND'S EARLY HISTORY (1501 – 1815)

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Ascension Island is located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean at 7° 57' south latitude and 14° 22' west longitude, almost halfway between the continents of South America and Africa. The 35-square-mile landmass lies roughly 500 miles south of the equator, 750 miles north-west of St. Helena, 1,400 miles east of Brazil, 1,000 miles south-west of Liberia, and 2,400 miles north-west of South Africa. The island is an above-water volcanic peak of the longest submarine mountain range in the world, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, which runs north to south down the middle of the Atlantic Ocean from Jan Mayen Island to Bouvet Island. First settled in 1815 by the British, Ascension has no indigenous population and houses approximately 1,100 people today.

The Portuguese navigator Juan de Nova initially discovered the island in 1501 during an expedition to India, giving it the name “Ilha de Nossa Senhora de Conceição” (“The Island of Our Lady of the Conception”), otherwise referred to simply as “Conception Island.” During his voyage home a year later, de Nova discovered the island of St. Helena, which he believed to be much better suited for colonization. The navigator neglected

to record his discovery of Ascension, which was subsequently “re-discovered” two years later by the Portuguese naval officer Afonso de Albuquerque.

In April 1503, King Manuel I had dispatched Albuquerque and his fleet to provide defense for ongoing Portuguese expeditions in India. Albuquerque spotted the island on Ascension Day—the Christian holiday celebrated on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Easter to commemorate Christ’s ascendance to heaven—and, unaware of de Nova’s visit two years prior, renamed it accordingly. In doing so, Albuquerque followed the common practice of the time—as, indeed, had de Nova—of naming a previously unknown land after the feast day on which it was discovered. (Easter Island, Christmas Island, and St. Helena are other examples of this custom.) As was also customary at the time, the Portuguese released several goats on the island to be used as a future food supply by ships passing through the area. Shortly thereafter, Ascension developed into an oceanic post office of sorts, where messages left by southbound ships would be taken aboard northbound ships for delivery to European ports. Sailors would also frequent the island in



Captain William Dampier.

search of turtle meat, both for sustenance and to battle scurvy, a common disease at the time resulting from a lack of Vitamin C.<sup>1</sup>

On 22 February 1701, the English buccaneer William Dampier landed on the island after his ship, the HMS *Roebuck*, sprung a leak and began to take on water. Dampier was returning from a two-year expedition to New Holland (now Australia) and New Guinea after a breakout of scurvy infected his crew and forced him to turn back prematurely. All of the *Roebuck*'s men made it safely to shore; however, the vessel ultimately sank the following morning. Dampier and his crew were stranded on the uninhabited island until 3 April, when three Royal Navy ships spotted and rescued the men. The author Daniel Defoe was most certainly influenced by the

journeys and writings of Dampier, and Dampier's wreck on Ascension may have played a role in inspiring the novel *Robinson Crusoe*.

Perhaps the most legendary story of the island is that of Leendert Hasenbosch, a Dutch castaway confined to Ascension in isolation for five months until his death in 1725. Hasenbosch, an officer in the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie—the Dutch East India Company), was serving as a book-keeper aboard the Dutch ship *Prattenburg* when he was convicted of the crime of sodomy (most likely for engaging in homosexual acts) on 11 April 1725. As punishment, on 5 May he was marooned on Ascension, where he kept a journal of his daily activities until he presumably died of dehydration five months later in mid-October. Hasenbosch's journal was discovered by the crew of the English East India ship *Compton* on 19 January 1726 during a return voyage to England. It was subsequently translated from Dutch to English and then published in 1728 under the title *An Authentick Relation*. According to the ship's log, the members of the *Compton* were unable to discover the body of Hasenbosch, leading to speculation regarding the journal's authenticity. Some historians have suspected that the translator may have added or modified entries to increase the book's resale value, and a handful even suggest that Defoe himself may have played a role in the journal's alteration. The original copy of Hasenbosch's manuscript has yet to be located, further enhancing the legend of the Dutchman's short stay on Ascension.<sup>2</sup>

In 1775, the English explorer Captain James Cook landed on the island during his second exploratory voyage around the world. Cook, who had recently discovered South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, was searching for the phantom island of St. Matthew in the South Atlantic. He reached Ascension on 28 May in search of turtle meat and, finding nothing else of use on the island, continued onward on 31 May toward the Fernando de Noronha archipelago.

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<sup>1</sup>Ascension's turtles have thrived on the island for generations, predominately due to its isolated location and lack of predators. The massive 400-plus-pound creatures miraculously travel well over a thousand miles from Brazil to Ascension annually to lay their eggs prior to returning home. In the past, turtle meat was a common dish associated with Ascension; however, today the turtles are strictly protected. For those interested in learning more about contemporary research being conducted on Ascension's turtles, see Sergio Ghione's *Turtle Island: A Journey to the World's Most Remote Island*.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed analysis of the life and journal of Leendert Hasenbosch, see Alex Ritsema's *A Dutch Castaway on Ascension Island in 1725*.

An American ship was wrecked on Ascension in 1799, leaving 15 men stranded until a passing ship, the HMS *Endymion*, came to their rescue. The men were discovered on 8 September when Sir Thomas Williams, captain of the *Endymion*, sent boats ashore while passing through the area. It is not certain how long the sailors had been marooned, but Williams managed to board all of them onto his vessel. Although the rescue was a success, Williams recorded

in his log the disappearance of one of his own men on the island. After searching for the sailor with no luck, the *Endymion* set sail and continued on its voyage. A short time after this tragedy, it became customary for passing ships to fire a cannon shot to alert possible castaways of their presence. This practice continued until the island's formal occupation in 1815.





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## BRITISH SETTLEMENT (1815 - 1939)

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On 22 October 1815, the British rear-admiral George Cockburn officially annexed Ascension following his escort of Napoleon Bonaparte to the “nearby” island of St. Helena, located roughly 750 miles to the south-east. Cockburn wanted to ensure that Ascension was not to be used as a staging base by the French or other adversaries who might have been planning Napoleon’s escape. He therefore instructed his men to establish a garrison and a lookout post to survey each vessel that approached the island in order to avoid another “Return from Elba.” Tristan da Cunha, located to the south of St. Helena, was annexed in 1816 to serve a similar purpose. During the first year of inhabitation, the Royal Navy instituted a system of gutters and pipes to transport fresh water, began the construction of a road, and started work on the island’s first pier. The island’s first communication system—semaphores placed atop mountain summits—was also established at this time.

By the 1830s, merely one decade following the death of Napoleon in 1821, Ascension had become a sanatorium for men of the West Africa Squadron who fell ill with various diseases during anti-slaving

patrols. Britain ultimately decided to retain their presence on Ascension at this time due to the island’s close proximity to West Africa and its strategic placement on the south-east trade-winds. In this era before the construction of the Panama and Suez canals, the island was also utilized as a base for British ships sailing long distances around the globe.

The Royal Marines took command of the island in 1823 with the arrival of Lt. Colonel Edward Nicolls, who oversaw the construction of numerous public works projects during his five-year stint. (Command of the island was officially transferred back to the Navy in 1844, only to return to the Marines again in 1905.) Nicolls continued the practice of housing sick sailors on the island so that they could recuperate. In a letter to the governor of Sierra Leone, the commandant stated the following:

It is with sincere regret that I have heard of the death of some of your most valued officers, and think it is my duty to inform you that if you require the bracing cool air of mountains, I have a humble but



George Cockburn.

clean (and to me) a very comfortable and healthy abode much at your service. We have plenty of good vegetables, mutton, beef, poultry, fish, tea, coffee, milk and eggs to all which, I will give an old soldier's hearty welcome to any of your officers or friends that you may entrust to my care.

Nicolls was replaced by Captain William Bate in 1828, who served for 10 years on Ascension until his abrupt death in 1838 after contracting an illness brought in by a visiting ship. During Bate's tenure, he oversaw the development of an intricate water system, the island's first official barracks, and a hospital that is still used to this day. The steadily growing garrison-town was officially coined George-town by the captain on 3 April 1829 in honor of King George IV. By 1830, there were roughly 200 people living on Ascension, including 86 Africans, and ships were calling at the island's port with regularity.

Bate wasn't the only commandant to fall victim to the various illnesses brought to the island. His

official successor, Captain Roger Tinklar, passed away in 1839 after only one year on Ascension, and Tinklar's replacement, Captain Henry Bennett, survived there a mere seven months. By this time there were two hospitals on the island, and one was reserved specifically for those with severe fevers. Ships with sick men had been quarantined from the populace in a section of the island known as Comfortless Cove since 1823, after a visit by the infected HMS *Bann* resulted in the deaths of several men stationed at the garrison.

Charles Darwin visited the island from 19 - 23 July 1836 during his global expedition aboard the *Beagle*. He noted:

The settlement is near the beach; it consists of several houses and barracks placed irregularly, but well built of white freestone. The only inhabitants are marines, and some negroes liberated from slave-ships, who are paid and victualled by government. There is not a private person on the island. Many of the marines appeared well contented with their situation; they think it better to serve their one-and-twenty years on shore, let it be what it may, than in a ship; in this choice, if I were a marine, I should most heartily agree.

He described the terrain of the island as being "entirely without trees, in which, and in every other respect, it is very far inferior to St. Helena...I saw the island, not smiling with beauty, but staring with naked hideousness." Darwin was overlooking Ascension's barren landscape, one void of vegetation with scattered basaltic lava flows and numerous reddish-brown craters. A later observer would describe the territory as being almost lunar in nature. Darwin's assistant, Syms Covington, observed the British outpost in his journal as follows:

The soldiers HERE appear well satisfied, although there is scarcely anything green on the whole island; as for their work they get their food, and of course their full pay as usual. The different departments are all built of sandstone, ARE uncommonly clean and commodious, and indeed every thing appears as if done for the common comfort of all.



Although numerous guns had been positioned at various locations throughout the island since the start of the British occupation, these were rarely maintained and highly deficient. Had an adversary truly wanted to seize Ascension from the British during the 1800s, they most likely would have succeeded with relative ease. However, the garrison was blessed by the fact that no other nation at the time perceived the small landmass as having any considerable value. This perception was shared by several within the British military, and by the mid-1860s serious consideration was given to abandoning the island. Many believed Ascension to be no longer of any value following Napoleon's death and the diminishment of the slave trade. The opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869 also dealt a substantial blow to the island's vitality and, coupled with a recent decision to move the West Africa Squadron's base from Ascension to Cape Town, its future appeared bleak. It was therefore suggested that the Royal Navy move its base to St. Helena, where they could conduct their African operations in what was believed to be a better-suited environment. A four-man committee was subsequently sent to Ascension in the late 1860s to assess the viability of the location; however, they unanimously decided to retain the island. This decision was reached, in part, due to St. Helena's refusal to house sick sailors infected with fever, as the island was afraid of diseases spreading among the general populace. Although Ascension was retained, the number of servicemen on the island was cut by roughly two thirds at the behest of the Admiralty. Talk of abandoning or selling Ascension surfaced with regularity through the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including an unsuccessful proposal in the early 1890s that would have traded the island for the German colony of Damaraland (now Namibia).

Activity on Ascension was relatively quiet until the Eastern Telegraph Company (ETC) arrived in late 1899 with plans of installing an underwater cable network linking Britain to Cape Town via various island nodes. Britain was to be connected to Ascension through the Cape Verde islands, and from there to St. Helena and on to Cape Town, so as to establish a round-about system linking the UK and South Africa. ETC was responsible for the innovation of the first worldwide cable communications network—the “Victorian Internet”—which by 1900 accounted

for roughly 100,000 miles of submarine cables. The island was to become a relay station and, on 15 December 1899, the first cable was established between Ascension and St. Helena. The network linking from St. Helena to Cape Town was established in early 1900, followed by another cable to Freetown in 1901. By early 1908 the station was relaying several thousand messages per month. 1910 witnessed a new cable linking Ascension and Buenos Aires, resulting in an ever-expanding telegraphic network base. Ascension wasn't the only island that the British were utilizing as a cable relay station at the time; Tabuaeran (Fanning) Island in the mid-Pacific and Direction Island on Coco-Keeling were serving similar purposes. As Simon Winchester succinctly points out in his book *Outposts: Journeys to the Surviving Relics of the British Empire*, “The British saw cables as the vital synapses of the Imperial nervous system.” By this time, the Empire had control over roughly one quarter of both the world's land and population. This remote island previously considered insignificant by many was evolving into a mid-Atlantic communications powerhouse.

Ascension continued to provide a link between Britain and various locations and activity on the island remained relatively unaltered during the First World War. The exception was the year of 1914, when the garrison was under fear of attack. The families of ETC employees stationed on the island had been ordered to take refuge on Green Mountain (the island's largest peak, at 2,870 feet above sea-level) around the time of the Battle of the Falklands on 8 December. Following the elimination of the German South Atlantic squadron in December 1914 and the arrival of Marine reinforcements to Ascension in January 1915, activity on the island resumed as before. Although the Germans could have dealt a substantial blow by sabotaging the cables in and around the island, an attack never commenced, and Ascension went unscathed for the duration of the conflict. The Admiralty understood the vital significance of the telegraph station, however, and ordered daily reports from the island to confirm that the location had not come under siege. A wireless station was ordered to be constructed in 1915, and was thereafter manned and operated daily during the war, relaying messages from ships in the South Atlantic to the UK and South Africa. On 20 October 1922, roughly four years

after the end of the war, the military withdrew from Ascension, leaving possession to the ETC, although the UK retained official control. Most of the military equipment established on the island during the war was either sold or demolished at this time. Several soldiers decided to stay on Ascension following the transfer and were subsequently hired by the cable company as civilian employees.

Upon the ETC's assumption of the management of island activity on 27 October 1922, Ascension officially became a colonial dependency of St. Helena. For the 107 years up until this point, the island had been uniquely recognized by the British as a "Sloop of War"—the HMS *Ascension*—to be operated at the discretion of the Admiralty. The commandant of the island was, in essence, the ship's captain and was therefore responsible for both administrative oversight and discretionary legal justice. Every child born on the island from 1815 to 1922 was officially recognized as having been born at sea. From 1922 onward, however, Ascension became an official territory of the UK, by way of becoming a dependency of a dependency.

It was a rarity for a commercial enterprise to take command of a colony at the time. Stephen A. Royle puts it best: "Ascension was administered by a private sector company, subject to some oversight from another colony, which itself was subject to the UK." Similar to the military commandants that previously ran the island, the superintendent of the civilian company was responsible for both the administration of daily activities and the law. Relatively little contact was made between Ascension and St. Helena during this period, granting the superintendent almost complete control over the island's affairs. Although the island was now subjected to civil law for the first

time, its unique legal structure deemed that the resident magistrate was also the employer. With no union to represent the workforce at the time, seeking legal action against the employer would have been a difficult task indeed. What's more, when the St. Helena Colony Development Company was awarded a contract to work on Ascension, they fell under the legal structure administered by the ETC. This meant that one private-sector organization had legal jurisdiction and control over another operating outside of its employ.

The bulk of the 168-person workforce in 1934 consisted of St. Helenians who had been transported to the island from the south-east, while the British predominantly assumed managerial and administrative positions. The employees of the ETC greatly enjoyed their life on the island, and this period witnessed the expansion of numerous recreational facilities, including a cinema club, tennis and badminton courts, an area to play cricket, and greens for golf. The golf course that developed was later recognized by the *Guinness Book of Records* as the worst in the world, and rightfully so. The lava-barren course, which remains open to this day, is devoid of much grass and is surrounded by rocks and vast wasteland. Recreational activity was important to members of the company, as only one ship arrived annually with visitors and mail.

In 1929 the ETC merged with its associated companies to become Imperial and International Communications Ltd., which changed its name in 1934 to Cable & Wireless Ltd. (C&W). Thousands of messages wired across the Atlantic traveled through Ascension's cable station each day while the employees enjoyed a secluded, relaxed environment up until the outbreak of war in 1939.



## THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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War broke out in Europe in September 1939, and Ascension's introduction to the latest conflict came just months later when, on 24 December, the island was approached by an unidentified submarine. The alarm sounded to warn the company of a possible attack; however, the approaching vessel turned out to be the HMS *Severn* stopping in hopes of gathering fresh fruits and vegetables. The *Severn* was returning to Freetown after an unsuccessful mission to locate the German oil tanker and supply vessel *Altmark*, which was in the South Atlantic in support of the notorious pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* at the time. The battleship had had a significant impact as a commerce raider in 1939, sinking nine Allied merchant ships in the Atlantic and causing considerable damage to Allied logistical operations.

In recognition of the need to provide adequate security on the island, the Ascension Volunteer Defense Force (AVDF) was established in April 1940. Stephen Cardwell, C&W's general manager at the time, was put in command of the small 27-person force, assisted by a group of NCOs and an officer of the Royal Artillery recently arrived from St. Helena.

Around this period, five radio operators from the Civilian Shore Wireless Service arrived on Ascension to man a high frequency direction finding (HF/DF) station, assisted by a 30-man Royal Navy detachment. These men were in charge of monitoring German naval radio frequencies in the area and relaying signals to their sister stations located in St. Helena and Freetown. The signals intelligence (SIGINT) collected was used to deter ongoing U-boat activity in the South Atlantic.

The defense of the island was strengthened roughly a year later in March 1941 with the arrival of a Royal Artillery detachment consisting of 44 servicemen. In addition, two 5.5-inch guns, previously removed from the HMS *Hood* (a vessel destroyed shortly thereafter by the German battleship *Bismarck* in the Battle of Denmark Strait on 24 May 1941) were brought ashore. The guns would come in handy later that year when the German U-boat U-124, commanded by Johann Hendrick Mohr, surfaced offshore.

Mohr and the crew of U-124 were patrolling in the South Atlantic when, on 3 December 1941, they



Sign at Wideawake Field. The National Archives.

encountered the American cargo ship SS *Sagadahoc* south-west of St. Helena. The *Sagadahoc* was en route from New York to Durban when it was stopped and searched by Mohr's men. Having discovered "contraband" in its cargo, Mohr decided to torpedo the 6,300-ton vessel after allowing the ship's personnel to board its available lifeboats. This was the third U.S. merchant ship to be destroyed prior to the American entry into the war. Around this time, the British sank the German auxiliary cruiser *Atlantis* and the supply ship *Python*, neglecting to rescue the 414 survivors who were now stranded at sea. Four U-boats, including Mohr's U-124, were forced to bring aboard all of these men during a rescue operation that commenced on 5 December; a daunting task for submarines not fitted for such a large number of passengers. Mohr concluded that the only way to get these men to shore in France in adequate time was for the U-boats to navigate on the surface. In an attempt to convince British forces that the U-boats were maintaining operations in the South Atlantic despite the circumstances, Mohr attempted to attack Ascension from the sea at mid-day on 9 December,

two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor and two days before Hitler would declare war on the United States. However, as soon as his U-124 was spotted, the men stationed at Ascension's garrison fired upon Mohr with the guns provided by the *Hood*, forcing the vessel to make an emergency crash dive and flee the area. Although he failed to deliver any damage, Mohr's plan ultimately proved successful. As a result of the attempted attack, British forces believed that the U-boats were still operating in the area, and Mohr was able to set sail for France, arriving shortly thereafter.<sup>3</sup>

In November 1941—one month before the United States would officially enter the war—the

governor of St. Helena relayed a classified message to Cardwell instructing him to survey Ascension for a site appropriate for building an airstrip. Cardwell was informed that the Americans would be involved in the process and was told not to discuss the plans with anyone. This was consistent with diplomatic negotiations between the U.S. and Britain that occurred in September 1940, granting the Americans the right to establish military bases in certain British territories in exchange for multiple naval destroyers. The U.S. was preparing to join the war effort and Ascension was to serve a vital purpose. Several British merchant ships had already been sunk in the Atlantic, and an airfield between South America and Africa would provide for both a refueling station for planes involved in logistical and combat operations and a staging base for anti-submarine raids. After surveying the island, Cardwell settled on a location in the south-west known as Waterloo Plain, which would soon be transformed into "Wideawake Field" (named after the numerous sooty terns, also known as "wideawake birds," that inhabited that area of the island). Cardwell noted that the site's flat terrain aligned with the southeast trade winds made it an

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<sup>3</sup>Mohr was later killed on 2 April 1943 when U-124 was sunk by the HMS *Stonecrop* and the HMS *Blackswan* west of Oporto, Portugal.



Rollers crash onto Ascension's shore. Col. J.C. Mullenix collection, Ascension Island Heritage Society.

ideal location for an airstrip. He then compiled his observation into a report and sent it to the governor of St. Helena; however, he failed to receive a follow-up response or notification from the Admiralty.

Ascension's company manager had been told that he would be informed of when an American team would arrive for further inspection, and so he was understandably shocked when, with no prior notice, a battleship approached the island on 25 December 1941. (With this incident, and the *Severn's* 24 December visit two years earlier, Christmas had become an eventful holiday for those stationed on Ascension since the start of the war.)

Given that Cardwell had received a classified directive to withhold information regarding the airstrip plan from those stationed at the garrison, his men were even more startled by the ship on the horizon. Poised to attack, they soon identified the incoming vessel as the American cruiser USS *Omaha*. On board was a reconnaissance team that had been sent from Brazil to inspect the potential location that Cardwell had recommended. Three Americans, led by Lt. Col. Kemp of the Army Air Corps, scrutinized the area for two days. The *Omaha* also dispatched a plane to conduct an aerial inspection. The American reconnaissance team's preliminary survey concluded that the site was an adequate one for development, and shortly thereafter they sent their proposal to Washington. Although there were some disputes between the U.S. and Britain regarding the specifics of the operation, including post-war rights to the

forthcoming airfield, the nations agreed to begin construction without delay.

The U.S. Army's 38<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Regiment arrived at Ascension—which they dubbed “The Rock”—on 30 March 1942. Before them lay a daunting task: construct a fully operational airfield in less than three months. The regiment was less than a year old, having been activated on 28 May 1941, and consisted of a wide range of draftees hailing predominantly from the east coast. By the time of the unit's formation at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, the “38<sup>th</sup> Engineers” consisted of roughly 1,300 servicemen. The men received orders in February 1942 that they would be deploying to an undisclosed territory called “AGATE,” which was a code-name for Ascension. Departing on 14 March, the Engineers boarded the Army transport ship USAT *Coamo* and the military freighters SS *Luckenbach* and SS *Pan Royal*. They were accompanied by 154 men of the 426<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery, 8 men of the 692nd Signal Corps Air Warning Detachment, a 77-person medical contingent, a 2-man postal section, a 9-man Army Airways Communication section, and ordinance, finance, and quartermaster detachments consisting of 14, 8, and 41 men respectively. Together these men comprised what was known as “Task Force 4612.” The *Coamo* and the *Luckenbach* were escorted to the South Atlantic by two destroyers, the USS *Ellis* and the USS *Greer*, and one cruiser, the USS *Cincinnati*. The *Pan Royal* sailed individually to the island unescorted while the main fleet stopped over in Recife to refuel before embarking toward Ascension, where they would change the dynamic of the island forever.

The task force spent the first 27 days just unloading the massive amount of equipment—8,000 tons of it—they had brought with them. This work was made more difficult by the island's notorious rollers—massive waves from the west that can reach up to 10 feet in height at unpredictable times. The Engineers encountered multiple other setbacks during the early phases of their operation: two men drowned and another was electrocuted, one soldier was killed when he fell off a bulldozer and the vehicle ran over him; several others contracted dysentery, from which they later recovered. A supply ship once failed to arrive and rations ran low, forcing the men to fend for themselves by catching porpoises, turtles, tuna, and whatever else the sea provided. Rations had to



5.5 inch guns provided by the HMS *Hood*. Col. J.C. Mullenix collection, Ascension Island Heritage Society.

be cut on two separate occasions, resulting in weight loss and fatigue among the men. The 38<sup>th</sup> managed to overcome these obstacles, however, and embarked upon an engineering marvel that many believed would be impossible to achieve.

Col. Robert E. Coughlin was the initial commanding officer in charge of U.S. military activity on the island. He was assisted by battalion commander—and future Chief of Engineers—Maj. Frederick J. Clarke.<sup>4</sup> The men were joined by administrative officer Col. James N. Tomlinson on 10 May 1942, who had been appointed by the Colonial Office to serve as a liaison between the Americans and the C&W workers. Tomlinson was also the appointed government representative to St. Helena, and therefore responsible for maintaining regular communication between the two islands. The Royal Artillery departed Ascension for St. Helena on 25 April following the transfer of the island's defense to the United States military. Prior to their withdrawal, all guns and ammunition on the island were handed over to the U.S. forces. The Royal Artillery had been manning the 5.5-inch guns, and upon their departure the 426<sup>th</sup> took over the responsibility. Although the Artillery left, the Royal Navy remained, tasked with the administration

of an HF signals station located in Georgetown. The AVDF also continued their presence on the island; however, they immediately came under the command of U.S. forces.

Ascension's unique terrain required the Engineers to be both innovative and experimental. Since the island's water supply was limited, the men first assembled sea-water purification units, coupled with makeshift water tanks for drinking and cooking. The initial water ration was only five gallons per week for each soldier; upon the arrival of more units, this was increased to

four gallons per soldier per day. The men were forced to bathe themselves, wash their clothes, and clean their mess kits using the salt water provided by the ocean. During construction of the airfield, a lack of sand and stone typically needed for pavement required the men to utilize what the island had to offer—volcanic ash and rock—mixed with water transported throughout the day and night from the ocean to the construction site. The Engineers also utilized the guano left by the island's birds; this was made into bricks to be used in the construction of buildings. The operation proceeded 24/7; at night the soldiers would work under camouflaged lighting systems that shielded their activity from enemy ships at sea, as the construction of the airfield was still extremely secret.

The U.S. and Britain went to great lengths to ensure the confidentiality of the island base. Strict censorship rules were established on Ascension, and all outgoing messages had to first be approved by the authorities. Telegrams were marked as if they were sent from Cape Town, and personnel stationed on the island were instructed not to speak of ongoing activity with anyone. Administrators of West African colonies were instructed not to publish any stories or reports referring to American activity on the

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<sup>4</sup>Clarke would later discuss the 38<sup>th</sup>'s mission after it had become public in a 1944 *National Geographic* article entitled "Ascension Island, An Engineering Victory."

island in their territories. Both American and British servicemen stationed on the island were prohibited from disclosing their location to anyone, and C&W workers were barred from discussing ongoing activity on the island with outsiders. In order to deter leaks of any kind, the C&W manager was instructed to censor all telegrams sent by his staff. In the case of a mail ship arriving prior to censorship, all letters were placed in a separate bag marked "Ascension Mail – Uncensored" to be reviewed by the British Censor in London.

The men of the 38<sup>th</sup> worked on four separate tasks at the start of the operation: 1) the formation of a camp site adjacent to where the airfield was to be built, 2) the arrangement of an area to hide and store aviation fuel tanks, 3) the construction of a road to transport supplies from Georgetown to the site, and 4) the establishment of a hospital for the medical contingent to work out of. The camp, named Camp Casey after Army engineer Maj. Gen. Hugh John "Pat" Casey, was completed on 20 April. Although the airfield was impossible to shield, the men were successful in camouflaging the eight steel fuel tanks that held 462,000 gallons each and the bomb-storage building with netting and rock so that they wouldn't be spotted from the air. Throughout the heat of those early days, the men of D-Company laboriously worked on the road, which thereafter became known as D-Co Road.

During the summer of 1942, the Engineers constructed a mess hall, two radar stations, several medical facilities, and a command complex. The command complex, which became known as "Command Hill," was erected with tiles imported from Recife and situated so that it provided a panoramic view of the island. The sanatorium became known as the 175<sup>th</sup> Field Hospital and was established near the base of Green Mountain, nearly 1,000 feet above sea level. The location was ideal for patients due to its cool climate, up to 15 degrees Fahrenheit cooler than the rest of the island. Roughly four miles from both Georgetown and Camp Casey, the sanatorium was also established as a "last stand area" in case the island was ever attacked. There was a cache of food and water at the site to provide for the soldiers should they have to retreat inland from the threat of potential occupiers. The other buildings consisted of a medical administration building, a surgery build-

ing, a supply building, and three wards for housing patients. The enlisted men stationed at the sanatorium would deal with a wide range of casualties during their extensive stay on the island, including routine illnesses, fatigued sailors rescued from sea, and victims of plane crashes. Soldiers assigned to the 175<sup>th</sup> attended conferences and classes throughout the war in order to keep them prepared for various potential catastrophes, including a possible chemical attack. Roughly 3,000 people were treated at the hospital during the first two years after it opened.

Pipelines were established in order to link the island's fuel tanks with the tanker ships offshore. The main sea pipe was laid on 3 June in an area known as Clarence Bay, an operation that required the assistance of nearly every person serving on the island at the time. The pipe was 1,100 feet long and had to be dragged into the sea by hand. Buoys were attached to the pipeline to keep it afloat before it reached the offshore tanker, at which time the buoys were shot at from a distance and sunk, establishing the connection nine fathoms undersea. The pipe was then connected to the tank farm, which would provide fuel for the aircraft that would soon be landing on the island.

The Engineers were making good progress, and by mid-May the airfield was already three quarters of the way completed. Washington was informed on 12 June that the runway was advanced enough to receive aircraft, although construction was not yet completed. The first landing, an unofficial one made by a British Fairey Swordfish plane, came just three days later, on 15 June. Royal Navy pilot Lt. E. Dixon-Child had taken off from the HMS *Archer* and was searching for survivors of the nearby torpedoed SS *Lyle Park*. Dixon-Child's orders also included dropping a message onto Ascension to be relayed by C&W to





Air transport Command mechanics work on an engine. The National Archives.

the Admiralty in London, but when he flew over the island he was surprised to see the airfield and decided to land. The pilot, planning to simply land and deliver the note, was met with machine-gun fire from the 426<sup>th</sup>. Three bullets hit the plane and a fourth hit the pilot's shoulder harness. Luckily the aircraft was identified before it suffered any significant damage, and Dixon-Child was cleared to land. Shortly after the message for C&W was delivered, the plane was back in the air and returning to the *Archer*.

Construction of the runway, 6,000 feet long and 150 feet wide, was completed in only 91 days. Soldiers had worked around the clock to finish the job by their imposed deadline; in the process, they had used roughly 13,000 blasting caps and over 35 tons of explosives to remove over 380,000 cubic yards of rock.

The airfield officially opened on 10 July with the arrival of the first American plane, a Consolidated

B-24 Liberator by the name of *Our Kissin' Cousin* en route to Natal from Accra. This was followed 10 days later by 14 American ferry planes en route to West Africa from Natal. By the beginning of August, 126 planes had landed on Wideawake Field. The first Royal Air Force Ferry Command aircraft, a Martin B-26 Marauder, landed on 6 August on its way to Accra. The first Pan American Airways plane, a Douglas C-54 Skymaster contracted to the U.S. Army Air Force's (USAAF) Air Transport Command, arrived roughly three months later on 16 November. The airfield was restricted to military use only; only in case of an emergency would a commercial aircraft be permitted to land.

The location of the airfield was critical for ongoing military and logistical operations in Africa because it served as a refueling station for multiple aircraft taking off from Brazil that would have otherwise been unable to make the transoceanic journey.

Often, an aircraft's passengers would stay overnight prior to departure in the morning; however, it was not uncommon for the layover to last only 40 minutes, just enough time for the plane to refuel while the personnel got something to eat at the nearby mess hall. Anti-submarine patrols originating from Natal would stop over on Ascension to refuel before returning back to their home base. At the time, it took roughly six hours for aircraft departing from Natal to make the 1,248-mile journey to the island. A famous quote espoused by pilots at the time was, "If we don't hit Ascension, my wife gets a pension."

Although the airfield was located in the most ideal location on the island, pilots were still advised to take caution when landing and taking off from the runway. One danger came from the numerous wideawake birds, which could potentially get caught in aircraft engines or break a window during takeoff





Soldiers attend a Memorial Day service at the American cemetery. Col. J.C. Mullenix collection, Ascension Island Heritage Society.

or landing. On a couple of occasions, the airfield was forced to temporarily shut down for hours at a time during the height of the birds' breeding season. Also, the end of the runway was scattered with numerous sharp volcanic rocks that could greatly harm a plane that accidentally overshot. Plans to extend the runway by an extra 700 feet began on 12 November 1942 and were completed on 5 February 1943; however, on 15 December 1943 a B-26 Marauder crashed into the rocks during takeoff. The plane exploded into flames, resulting in the death of all three people onboard.

On 14 August 1942 the transport ship USAT *James T. Parker* arrived at Ascension accompanied by two freighters, one cruiser, and one destroyer. The fleet was transporting the island's main occupying force, the 91<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, along with a new

medical unit and the 28<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery. Accompanying them were several anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, as well as three machine guns designated for each potential landing point on the island. While the men were unloading the supplies brought by the vessels, three Navy PBY Catalina maritime patrol aircraft surveyed the area for enemy submarines.

The 91<sup>st</sup> Infantry was under the command of Col. Ross O. Baldwin and consisted of roughly 2,000 enlisted men and 138 officers. On 17 August Col. Baldwin assumed command of all U.S. forces on Ascension. Two days later the majority of the 38<sup>th</sup> Engineers departed for the Congo, where they had been tasked with the construction of another airfield at Leopoldville; however, the original medical contingent remained permanently stationed at the field

hospital. A total of 203 men of the 38<sup>th</sup> remained on the island and formed the 898<sup>th</sup> Engineer Aviation Company while the 28<sup>th</sup> took over the 5.5-inch guns from the 426<sup>th</sup>. The 91<sup>st</sup> initially tasked two companies with the island's defenses: K Company was responsible for the north (Northeast Bay, English Bay, and Comfortless Cove) and M Company was responsible for the south (Long Beach, South West Bay, Mars Bay, and Gannet Hill). The men of the AVDF were later assigned to the anti-aircraft guns that protected the Georgetown settlement.

A daily newsheet began publication on 21 August, providing news from around the world to those stationed on the island. Originally titled "The 877 News" after the Army Post Office number for Ascension, the newsheet was renamed "The Wideawake News," until 15 January 1943, when the American Censorship authorities changed the title to "The Daily News" for security purposes. A few months later the name was changed again to "Task," which managed to stick for the remainder of the war.

The 91<sup>st</sup> experienced their first mishap on 28 August 1942 when a group of servicemen accidentally fired upon an operator tending to a water distillation unit. The operator approached the unit at night using a flashlight, which must have been highly uncustomary because he soon found himself under fire. Luckily the man survived the ordeal unscathed, as roughly 40 shots were fired upon his location before he was identified.

On 3 September the men again accidentally fired upon a friendly target, and again luckily failed to inflict any substantial damage. A P-39 experienced a fuel system failure shortly after taking off from Ascension and was forced to make an emergency landing in the ocean. The island's gunners were caught by surprise when they witnessed an unexpected object on the horizon. Believing the object to be an approaching enemy submarine that signaled a coming attack on the island, the gunners opened fire. The lieutenant piloting the aircraft managed to survive the ordeal and was rescued by one of the crash boats assigned to the island after he was identified.

The garrison was again alarmed on 15 September when they were informed of multiple enemy ships operating within the area. Unbeknownst to the men on the island, the ships were responding to the nearby sinking of the RMS *Laconia* by U-156, which had

occurred on 12 September. Werner Hartenstein, the German commander of U-156, had sunk the *Laconia* merely 250 miles from Ascension; however, when he discovered that the ship was transporting 1,800 Italian prisoners of war, Hartenstein immediately began a rescue operation, calling for diplomatic neutralization and pledging not to harm any Allied ships assisting in the area. Ascension was informed of neither the sinking of the *Laconia* nor the neutralization of the area and, after receiving intelligence that U-boats were operating nearby, sent a B-24 piloted by Lt. James Harden to inspect the site on 16 September. Harden discovered U-156 assisting lifeboat passengers and radioed back to the island for orders. Still unaware of Hartenstein's neutralization of the area, Ascension instructed the B-24 to attack U-156. After leveling damage to the U-boat, the aircraft returned to the island, angering both Hartenstein and Rear Admiral Karl Doenitz who was in charge of all German submarine activity.

In response to the attack, Doenitz ordered that all survivors be transported to Vichy French ships which were on their way to the area. The servicemen on Ascension, still unaware of what was going on, immediately came to the assumption that the French vessels were on their way to attack the island. On 17 September Harden was again dispatched to the site with his B-24, where he attacked U-506, although no damage was issued. Doenitz became so annoyed by Harden's attacks that he issued the infamous "Laconia Order" that same day. The order instructed all U-boat commanders to avoid rescuing or assisting any survivors of shipwrecks no matter the circumstance. Later, during the Nuremberg War Trials, Doenitz was sentenced to 10 years in prison for the implementation of this particular order. Ascension was finally informed of the details of the rescue mission later the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup>, but by then it was too late. Despite the circumstances, over 1,000 people survived the *Laconia* incident.

Allied forces began to land in North Africa on 8 November, and many of the planes stopped on the airfield to refuel while en route. By mid-November, a directive had been issued warning naval vessels not to sail within 70 miles of Ascension unless routed to the island with prior permission. 24 November witnessed the island's transfer of command to the U.S. Army's South Atlantic Command, headquartered



A baseball game in full swing. The National Archives.



Kirkwood survivors. Col. J.C. Mullenix collection, Ascension Island Heritage Society.



Benaukt survivors. Col. J.C. Mullenix collection, Ascension Island Heritage Society.



Catholic Easter service at the Grotto. The National Archives.



USO performers at the "Bull Gang Theatre." Col. J.C. Mullenix collection, Ascension Island Heritage Society.



Wideawake Field. The National Archives.

in Recife and overseen at the time by Maj. Gen. Robert L. Walsh. Over a year would pass before Walsh visited the island for an inspection on 24 December 1943.

On 16 December 1942, four South Africans arrived on the island, having been contracted to work on the Royal Navy's wireless telegraphy (W/T) installation plant. It was not uncommon for the Admiralty to contract constructional work out to West Africans and South Africans, who were transported to and from the island throughout the war as labor demands arose.

On 22 December, permission was granted for U.S. servicemen to use an area in the southeast section of the island as an air bombing practice range. As of 18 December, civilians working for C&W were prohibited from visiting the area during the week. Bombing practice ceased on 27 May 1943 and the area was reopened.

Col. Baldwin was re-posted and U.S. forces on the island came under the command of Lt. Col. Russell B. Hathaway on 27 January. By now the airfield was witnessing considerable daily traffic, and at times up to 40 planes were situated on the runway. The AVDF was training successfully with U.S. forces and cooperation between units was reported as excellent. Roads were being constructed throughout the island, and by this point roughly half of those planned were completed. Large fish were also being caught with regularity off the shore, providing food for both the servicemen and the C&W employees.

February and March witnessed increased U-boat activity in Ascension's surrounding waters—in one instance only eight miles offshore—forcing the com-

mand to issue island-wide blackouts on a couple of occasions. The enemy was still unaware of the ongoing Allied activity on the island, and the blackouts were issued to continue to shield the military's presence.

On 8 March the British South Atlantic Freight Service began to make stopovers on Ascension during its weekly flights to Accra. Canadian Royal Air Force Pilot-Officer F. S. Lamplough arrived on 14 March to assume command of British Ferry operations. March also witnessed the establishment of wireless communication with Accra, Robertsfield, and Natal.

Taking over from Hathaway, Col. J.C. Mullenix of the U.S. Cavalry assumed command on 1 April. Two days later members of the Royal Air Force began to arrive on the island. The RAF unit that eventually formed was tasked with operating a communications hub at the airfield later known as the "No. 90 Staging Post." The post consisted of four officers (an operations officer, a signals officer, and two cipher officers), one sergeant cipher clerk, and 12 airmen (nine radio circuit operators, one cipher clerk, and two transmitter station operators). These men worked with the Americans in a joint U.S. Air Transport Command/RAF Transport Command Operations building and oversaw numerous aircraft deliveries to and from the island.

In May a U.S. meteorological post was established in St. Helena to help better determine the weather forecasts for pilots flying in and out of Ascension. During this time, the soldiers on Ascension rescued several men who were stranded at sea—survivors of

the nearby U.S. *Samuel Jordan Kirkwood* and Dutch *Benaukt* wrecks—and treated them at the 175<sup>th</sup> Field Hospital. Survivors of the *Benaukt* were subsequently picked up on 7 July by the HMS *Corfu* and transported to West Africa. As a result of these rescues, U.S. commander Mullenix requested an appropriate vessel to engage in rescue operations offshore.

By the middle of May, the U.S. presence on Ascension had become public and the operation was no longer a secret. Although the world was now aware of the island's activity, the secrecy ban was not lifted until 26 November. The North Africa campaign ended on 13 May and the Allies took control of North Africa, in part due to the refueling station strategically located on Ascension. The airfield continued to be of use following the Allied invasion of Sicily on 10 July, as aircraft maintained their regular stop-over on the island. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall landed on the island for a visit on 5 June while en route to the U.S. following a meeting in Algiers. Later on 25 July, 168 U.S. servicemen arrived as reliefs aboard the *Gatun*. This was coupled by the 12 September return of the *Gatun*, which brought 62 U.S. military police to the island.

The summer of 1943 also witnessed increased submarine activity within the vicinity of the island, prompting the 30 September formation of a U.S. Navy squadron tasked with conducting anti-submarine patrols in PB4Y-1s. On 1 October the USS *Milwaukee* and the USS *Moffett* arrived with 28 U.S. Navy personnel to assist the newly formed squadron. The Navy pilots engaged in multiple operations throughout the fall season and into 1944, locating and sinking several U-boats maneuvering in the South Atlantic. They were assisted in their efforts by the HF/DF station that was working in conjunction with St. Helena and Freetown. The target reports that were quickly issued by the station provided the pilots with pin point enemy U-boat locations, resulting in several successful missions.

October 1943 was a rough month for those stationed on Ascension, as three plane crashes occurred around the island resulting in the death of 16 men. Three bodies were recovered at sea and subsequently buried at the U.S. cemetery that had been established a year earlier in an area of the island known as “Two Boats.” The worst crash on the island occurred less than two years later when, on the morning of 10

May 1945, a Douglas C-58B landed prematurely. The aircraft exploded shortly after impact, killing 12 passengers and injuring the other six people on board. In total, more than 60 men died serving on or around Ascension during the war. Many of these deaths occurred when planes crashed while arriving at or departing from the island. Thirty-six Americans were buried at the U.S. cemetery prior to the February 1947 repatriation of their bodies to Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico.

On 11 December, the USS *Monterey* arrived on the island with more reliefs; 183 servicemen of the 895<sup>th</sup> Engineer Aviation Company, 26 men of the Signal Corps, and 56 Navy personnel arrived to relieve members of the 898<sup>th</sup> and the naval detachment.

During the entire year of 1943, Wideawake Field received 4,779 tactical planes (3,595 U.S. and 1,184 RAF) and 2,156 cargo planes (1,984 U.S. and 172 RAF) while accommodating a total of 59,399 transit personnel. The total fuel consumption for the year was 8,467,195 gallons. Several of the island's facilities that had previously been made up of fabricated tents and huts were replaced by sturdier buildings of timber or brick and many new roads were asphalted. An additional water distillation unit was also installed on the island, allowing the daily ration to be increased to eight gallons per man per day.

January 1944 witnessed another milestone for the island's airfield as a record-setting 98 planes were received in one day, on the 25th. The Allies had landed in Anzio, Italy, on 22 January and several of these aircraft were on their way to assist with the ongoing operation. One month later, on 26 February, the 898<sup>th</sup> Engineers departed Ascension for the Pacific Theater on the SS *State of Maryland*, accompanied by the *Omaha*.

By the spring, over 1,000 planes were stopping to refuel on Ascension each month. Fifty St. Helenians were transported to the island on 11 March to assist with ongoing U.S. military projects. Much like the British would contract work out to Africans, U.S. forces began to hire St. Helenians for similar purposes. One of the projects consisted of laying a new 2,350-foot replacement submarine pipe to link the fuel tanks to the tankers offshore. This pipe line was established on 20 March in similar fashion to the one constructed roughly two years earlier.

In order to pass the time, the Americans established



The hydroponics garden. The National Archives.

a nine-hole golf course, a baseball field, a volleyball court, an area for horse-shoe throwing, and an outdoor theatre. The theatre became known as the “Bull Gang Theatre” and was later expanded to host live United Service Organizations (USO) entertainment events on the island. Some of the entertainment involved nightly movie screenings and occasional game and party nights. An Anglican church known as “St. Mary’s” had been on Ascension since the early 1840s, providing a place of worship for Protestants stationed on the island, and in April 1944 Catholics got their own place of worship when the 895<sup>th</sup> Engineers erected a Roman Catholic chapel known as “The Grotto.”

The island experienced a setback on 22 April when the *Gatum*, a U.S. ship carrying fuel and supplies, caught fire while in Recife Harbor en route to Ascension. Everything on the ship was destroyed, forcing Ascension to temporarily ration supplies and call for emergency fuel. Water also had to be rationed to 3.5 gallons per person, as fuel was needed in order to run the distillation units. Given that only 15 days’ worth of fuel remained on the island, a tanker needed to arrive quickly. The call was answered on 5 May with the arrival of the *Mica* with emergency fuel supplies. However, the situation remained critical until further fuel and supply transports arrived later in the month on 21 and 26 May.

In contrast to the earlier buildup of troop levels on Ascension, the spring of 1944 brought an overall decrease in the number of servicemen assigned there. The 426<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery received their orders to return to the States on 22 March and 18 of the island’s



The hydroponics garden. The National Archives.

fighter pilots were transferred out on the 27<sup>th</sup>, leaving only two with the squadron. On 3 April the *Monterey* returned to Ascension accompanied by the USS *Cannon* and the Brazilian destroyer *Marcilio Dias*. The *Monterey* was to transport the 48 men of the 28<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery and roughly 450 other servicemen off the island. The 28<sup>th</sup> was later inactivated on 5 October, and its members were reassigned to separate Army units stationed on the island. On 14 April the *Monterey* departed for Recife, escorted by the USS *Christopher*.

The island’s leadership also underwent changes throughout the spring and summer. On 19 April Col. A.J. Ronin replaced Col. Mullenix as commander of U.S. forces on the island. Brig. Gen. Ralph H. Wooten assumed command of the South Atlantic Command on 19 May, taking over from Maj. Gen. Walsh. Wooten would first visit Ascension with his staff on 23 July. Capt. Caldwell gave up his oversight of C&W on 14 June, transferring command of the AVDF to R.W.C. Byrne, who was subsequently promoted from sergeant to captain. Just over three months later, on 26 September, Mr. Maurice Campbell Clarke was sworn in as resident magistrate.

By the end of June there were roughly 1,400 servicemen left on the island. Enemy U-boat activity in the area was at its lowest since the war began. The 10 July return of the *Monterey* escorted by the *Marcilio Dias* brought 600 U.S. personnel to relieve those stationed on the island. The ships departed four days later with roughly 400 servicemen on board.

The island’s first radio station, “WXHR,” became operational on 13 September, broadcasting within a



Nesting grounds of the Wideawake birds. The National Archives.

40-mile radius. The station would transmit news to the troops for four hours per day through the roughly 300 receiving sets that were located on the island. Also, following the *Gatun* incident earlier in the year, construction on two new 420,000-gallon fuel tanks to serve as emergency backups began at the end of September. This project was completed and fully operational by the end of December.

The *Monterey* arrived again on 17 October, this time escorted by the *Christopher* and bringing 382 replacements for U.S. servicemen. The ships departed

four days later with 495 relieved personnel, lowering the total number of U.S. servicemen on the island. By the end of the year, there were 82 U.S. Navy personnel, 1,362 U.S. Army personnel, 43 Royal Navy personnel, 18 Royal Air Force personnel, 31 C&W workers, and 81 St. Helenians, for a total of 1,617 people on the island. Further strength reductions would come over the next year as the war came to a close.

Soldiers on Ascension, under the direction of an American civilian consultant named Kendrick W.



Blodgett, constructed a hydroponics farm known as “Hydroponics Station No. 1 Laboratory” in January of 1945. The farm was such a remarkable achievement that it received coverage in a 1945 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*. The Engineers were able to carve out an area of roughly 80,000 square feet and convert it from rough, barren volcanic terrain into lush vegetation. The farm grew several fresh vegetables, including lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers. Given the isolated location of Ascension, the importation of fresh vegetables was nearly impossible at the time; before the hydroponics farm was operational, the men lived off of canned and frozen food rations, fish, and occasional fruit brought in from Brazil, West Africa, and South Africa. A pre-existent small farm on Green Mountain produced a limited supply of vegetables, but nothing like the hydroponics station achieved. Later in the year, on 31 March, a hive of bees was transported from the U.S. to the island in hopes of assisting with the fertilization process. The Ascension station was the USAAF’s first large-scale testing center of the hydroponics method, and it proved mightily successful. By the springtime, everyone on the island was

receiving fresh vegetable rations two times per week, a marked increase from the past.

On 2 February Captain R.W.C. Byrne relinquished command of the AVDF and was replaced by Sergeant Major G. Addison-Williamson, who served as the senior NCO in command. Gen. Wooten visited the island again with his staff for an inspection on 28 February, departing on 2 March. Interestingly, Ascension’s first monkey arrived on 4 March after a PB4Y-1 landed from Natal en route to the Azores. The crew was carrying their pet monkey aboard the

flight, and the animal managed to escape during their one-night layover on the island. Unable to recover their pet, the crew took off the next morning with the creature still at large.

On 6 March, the famous RAF Liberator *Commando* AL504 became the first aircraft to fly 2,400 miles directly from Cape Town to Ascension, making the flight in 14 hours and 16 minutes. The aircraft, which had been previously used by Winston Churchill, was carrying multiple passengers tasked with investigating British telecommunications services worldwide. During their 70,000-mile tour, the “Empire Telecommunications Commission” had stopped on Ascension to refuel before departing for Natal. Unfortunately, the tour was never completed as the *Commando* crashed into the sea later that month on 27 March during a flight from Britain to the Azores archipelago, killing everyone onboard.

The U.S. Navy detachment ceased activity on 20 June, relinquishing their duties to the U.S. Army. The detachment departed the island 10 days later by air for Brazil. A phased withdrawal from Ascension had begun and the various outposts situated around the island were abandoned. Several of the Coast Artillery guns and two of the radio-location detector stations were also dismantled around this time. Also, the Signal Unit was being incrementally phased out and departing via aircraft. The Royal Navy’s HF signals station closed down on 11 June and was subsequently taken over by C&W. The men departed aboard the HMS *Fal* on 15 July en route to Freetown, and all RN activities on Ascension ceased on 2 August. The last of the 692nd Signal Corps and the 91st Infantry departed on 25 August onboard the USS *Madison*.

In September only 40 aircraft landed on Ascension. The monthly average of planes received by Wideawake Airfield from September 1945 to June 1946 was 41. The *Madison* returned once again to transport more troops from the island, departing on 17 September with 340 U.S. servicemen. Wooten made his final inspection visit on 28 October and by then most of the buildings had started to be dismantled. The remaining personnel stationed at the 175<sup>th</sup> Field Hospital were transferred to the airfield, abandoning the original structures at the base of Green Mountain.

The U.S. military had increased their withdrawal speed and just 450 men remained, a significant decrease from the roughly 4,000 that were stationed



on Ascension in mid-1943 during the height of activity. "Task," the daily newssheet, ceased publication on 9 September. The No. 90 Staging Post was closed on 2 December and all Royal Air Force personnel departed on 9 December. By the end of 1945 only 225 men remained on Ascension.

The year 1946 was relatively quiet with only 82 U.S. servicemen stationed on the island. The men remained there until 1947, when the airfield finally closed. In March of that year, the War Department in Washington made the decision to close the airfield and withdraw the remaining personnel, and on 31 May the airfield was deactivated and all remaining men were evacuated. Although the soldiers deconstructed several buildings prior to their departure, many structures remained untouched and abandoned. Ammunitions were buried or cached, while several fragmentation bombs were destroyed on-site. Massive amounts of fuel were also left behind, so much in fact that it was able to power all of the cars on the island for over a decade. The HF station was handed over to the 200 remaining C&W workers, who subsequently converted it into a homing beacon transmitter. C&W reassumed control of the island in 1947 and the island went back to housing roughly only 170 residents.

Although the military had departed, it wasn't long before they returned. Recognizing the significance of the base, the U.S. government reached an agreement with Britain to re-establish a presence on Ascension in 1956. The U.S. Air Force (USAF) arrived and began work on upgrading Wideawake Field, extending the runway so that larger aircraft could land. An Eastern Test Range station was erected in 1957, which was used to track and monitor missiles launched from Cape Canaveral. A decade later, in 1967, NASA established a tracking station which supported the agency's global communications network. Involved in the Apollo lunar landing program, the station proved to be a vital link in the network. NASA has since departed, but the USAF continues to support the agency's endeavors from the island. Aside from assisting with NASA and the Cold War effort, Ascension was also utilized during the Falkland Islands conflict in 1982. RAF pilots would land on the airfield to refuel while en route to the Falklands, and a detachment is still present on the island today. The RAF continues to make flights between the UK and the Falklands, and the weekly stop on

Ascension is the only form of transportation to and from the island. Civilians can visit only if permission has first been granted by the island's administrator.

The arrival of the 38<sup>th</sup> Engineers in March of 1942 drastically altered the face of the island, and forever thereafter it has been used in various capacities by the U.S. and British governments. The militarization of the island has served the national security interests of the two nations for roughly seven decades, and it continues to serve as an important asset, albeit one that is largely overlooked. The airfield on Ascension proved vital to the defeat of Rommel in North Africa and contributed heavily to operations in Sicily and Italy throughout the war. The island also served as a refueling station for aircraft en route to the Middle East and the China Burma India Theater (CBI). From 1943 to 1944, over 25,000 aircraft landed on Wideawake Field on their way to assisting the Allied war effort. Numerous German U-boats were sunk as a result of the anti-submarine patrols that were coordinated from the base, dampening Axis naval pursuits in the South Atlantic. Ascension's contribution to the war effort is perhaps best summarized by Col. Mullenix in a 1944 letter to Cable and Wireless:

Ascension Island has played a unique and vital part in the war...Without the existence of Ascension, without its active facilitation of the movement of our airplanes, the indispensable aviation support for our troops in North Africa could not have been accomplished at the critical period when Rommel and his Afrika Corps were literally assaulting the gates of Cairo. That aviation passed through Ascension safely and surely played its decisive part in driving the German and Italian forces from North Africa.

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