

IN PERSPECTIVE

Americans shamed into Pacific war tribute: RAF hero wins battle for Guadalcanal memorial to Marines

On June 21, 1992, journalists John Hiscock and Tom Hughes reported in the *Sunday Telegraph* one man's mission to create a fitting memorial of the contribution to the Pacific war of those who fell at Guadalcanal.

For the past two years, the hotels on the Pacific island of Guadalcanal have been booked up for the days around August 7 for a long-awaited and, many believe, long-overdue ceremony.

On that day, the 50th anniversary of the US Marines landing on the tiny island, a memorial honouring the Americans who died in battle there will be unveiled. Dominating the skyline, the imposing memorial will not only commemorate the Allied victory that was the turning point of the war in the Pacific, but will allay finally the embarrassment and anger many ex-Servicemen have felt over the tiny smudge in the ocean where 1,500 Americans were killed and 4,200 wounded. Some 15,000 Japanese were posted as killed or missing in action.

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For more than a decade, American visitors to the island have been shocked to see a magnificent memorial built by the Japanese on the peak of Mount Austen. It was the highest and last Japanese strongpoint to be yielded up in the bitter fighting of 1942. Four gleaming white 20ft-high towers, converging to form a hollow cross, bear a bronze plaque explaining in English that the monument symbolises love, trust, bravery and wisdom. In contrast, the American memorial consisted of a marker, planted on another ridge and almost choked by grass and weeds.

‘That told me that the Japanese cared more about their dead than the Allies did,’ said Bob Reynolds, a Londoner and former RAF bomber pilot who now runs a travel agency in northern California. He first visited Guadalcanal 12 years ago. ‘I was terribly disappointed and also horrified that there was no memorial indicating that Guadalcanal was the principal turning point of the Pacific campaign.



Above The U.S. memorial at Guadalcanal.

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The six-month struggle for Guadalcanal, part of the former British protectorate of the Solomon Islands, not only blocked the Japanese advance and the threat to Australia, but also gained precious time for the Allied forces to regroup.

‘I was ashamed that the local people looking at both memorials could not decide who won a great battle to bring them, and the world, freedom,’ said Mr Reynolds. ‘So I decided I had to do something about it.’

Since then Mr Reynolds, 71, has returned to the island more than 30 times in his efforts to organise the fund-raising to construct a suitable memorial for the Americans.

‘Being a foreigner I had to sow the seed of the idea in American minds to get things rolling,’ he said. ‘We in Britain have a sense of history that is not part of the American national character.’

In 1986, he organised a ‘Pacific Memories’ cruise to Guadalcanal, taking 640 people, including the Pentagon’s top brass and General William Westmoreland, the US commander in Vietnam, to the Solomon Islands. ‘I pointed out the Japanese memorial and said it was a pity there was nothing similar for the Americans,’ he said. ‘General Westmoreland immediately gave his support and that’s when things started to happen.’

The Guadalcanal Solomon Islands War Memorial Foundation was formed with Mr Reynolds as the secretary. Now, eight years and some \$300,000 later, the finishing touches are being applied to have the memorial ready for the dedication ceremonies which will feature a fly-past by US, Australian and New Zealand aircraft.

Although there is no overt bragging, privately those involved in the effort are satisfied that the memorial, in a commanding position on Skyline Drive, will be more imposing than the Japanese one. The granite and marble monument is surrounded by obelisks and directional walls, radiating outwards, pointing towards the battle sites and bearing descriptions of the fighting and the units involved. It overlooks Ironbottom Sound, the graveyard for more than 40 warships.