

The First Overseas OCS - Camp Stevens, New Caledonia - 1942

Well known is Fort Benning's legacy of establishing the Officer Candidate School when Omar Bradley took command of Fort Benning in 1941. But another Benning rising star, Alexander Patch, who had served on the Infantry Board for three years, created another first for OCS.

Six weeks after Pearl Harbor, Patch, as a brigadier general, was appointed to head "Task Force 6814" which was being shipped to New Caledonia, a French colonial protectorate in the Pacific, to protect the strategic island from Japanese assault. New Caledonia sat astride the strategic sea passage from the U.S. to Australia and New Zealand.

Task Force 6814 was a hastily assembled ad hoc assortment of units including two National Guard regiments that were orphaned from their guard divisions when the Army converted to triangular divisions of three regiments, versus the four regiments in a square division prior to World War II. Task Force 6814 was referred to as "an odd conglomeration of spare parts, a wartime stew of men and equipment."

Task Force 6814 picked up the orphaned 182nd Infantry Regiment from the Massachusetts National Guard's 26th Yankee Division and the 132nd Infantry Regiment orphaned from the Illinois 33rd National Guard Infantry Division. Patch picked up the 164th Infantry Regiment, orphaned from the 34th Infantry Division of the North Dakota National Guard, which arrived in New Caledonia a month after the task force landed there.

On New Caledonia, Patch quickly went about creating an infantry division suitable for island warfare. The War Department had no number to assign to the new division so Patch, ever the innovator, held a contest in his task force to name the division. The winning entry was Americal which stood for "American Forces on New Caledonia." The name stuck and the Americal became the only Army division with a name and not a number.

Mindful the Americal needed a whole new crop of young officers to staff his division and that many of Fort Benning's OCS graduates were destined for North Africa, Patch asked for and received permission to establish his own OCS on New Caledonia.

The school became the first officer candidate school to be established outside the continental limits of the U.S. and it was begun on July 10, 1942 at Camp Stevens, New Caledonia. Standards for selection were very high. The examining board consisted of two majors and one lieutenant colonel.

Training was oriented for infantry officers, but graduates were detailed for other branches such as Ordnance and Quartermaster to staff the new units created from "the military stew of men and equipment" in the task force. Their branch training was on the job by their assigned unit, but, owing to the high standards of selection for OCS recruits, they performed magnificently. Patches' New Caledonia OCS was immensely important in staffing the new units created to round out his new division. The first graduation was held on September 18, 1942.

In mid-October advance units of the 164th Infantry Regiment were rushed to Guadalcanal and one battalion was led through the night up to the severely depleted defensive lines of the Marines during the battle for Henderson Field. With no time to establish their own sector, the tough-as-

nails North Dakotan infantrymen filled in among the legendary Chesty Puller's depleted Marine battalion, which was covering a two-battalion front – just in the nick of time. The line held during the night and the Americal became the first Army division in World War II to go on the offensive against the enemy.

The Americal would relieve the First Marine Division on Guadalcanal and Patch would become a corps commander during the heavy fighting which followed on the island to finally defeat the Japanese. Patch was then picked by Gen. George C. Marshall to be transferred to the European Theater to gain his third star and take command of the newly formed IV Corps.

After a rest and refit in Fiji the Americal went on to relieve the Marines at their small beachhead on Bougainville and, with the 37th National Guard Division (Ohio), severely destroyed Japanese forces, including much of the Japanese Army 6th Division, the division primarily responsible for the Rape of Nanking. Then on to the Philippines with heavy combat in Leyte and other parts of the Vasayas, including the liberation of the island of Cebu. The Americal was one of the first Army divisions to arrive in Yokohama, Japan for occupation duties.

Patch's OCS on New Caledonia remained after the Americal Division departed, offering a steady feed of quality young officers for the war effort in the Southwest Pacific Theater.

By COL (Ret) David W. Taylor, Americal Division Veteran's Association Historian

Other Overseas Programs 1942-1945

Another OCS was formed in the Pacific Theatre at Camp Columbia Brisbane, Australia which afforded more space and larger facilities for training officers. This, plus the feed of junior officers from Fort Benning, supplied most of the junior officers in the Pacific Theatre.

The concept for the Overseas OCS training was also adopted in Great Britain and, when France was liberated, one was established at Fontainebleau as well.. Candidates for these Overseas OCS programs, in addition to the selections of physical fitness and mental aptitude as at Fort Benning, a candidate also had to be recommended by a battalion commander or high rank. Many of these candidates had been in the Army for a number of years due to not finding jobs elsewhere during the Depression. They exhibited great potential from the enlisted ranks.