

Guiuan as a Naval and Air Base in World War II

Ricardo Trota José

Abstract

The fact that Guiuan was a major base during World War II is known in general terms. Portions of the airbase and street layout remain. What is not known are the details of the base: why and how it was constructed, what strategic purpose it served, and what units were based there. The airfield was one of the largest airfields in the Philippines and was built to handle large, long-range bombers. Guiuan was also home to a large Patrol Torpedo (PT) boat base. This paper will try to answer these questions, shedding more light on the role of Guiuan during World War II. Preliminary notes on the experience of the area under the Japanese Occupation will also be given.

Keywords: *Guiuan, World War II, Guiuan Air Base, Naval Station Samar, Manicani*

Introduction

It is a little-known fact that the municipality of Guiuan and its environs in the present Province of Eastern Samar played a very

important role in World War II. Homonhon Island, close by, has been celebrated as where Magellan landed in 1521. Suluan Island is recognized as one of the first places where American soldiers landed in 1944, even before the main landings took place on 20 October. But Guiuan itself was destined to play a significant role in that war, one that is largely forgotten today. This paper will discuss the U.S. naval base facilities and the all-important air base that were set up beginning December 1944 and completed in mid-1945. Apart from what facilities were constructed, the operations of these bases will also be narrated, thus bringing to light the important role of Guiuan in the war.

Before the Base

Prior to the war, the municipality of Guiuan was a small, quiet town. It had a population of just over 4,000 in the *población*, but over 23,100 of the residents of all the barrios (barangays) were counted. It lay in the extreme south-easternmost tip of Samar and was relatively isolated. Among its important islands were Manicani, Tubabao and Calicoan, all of which would become important parts of the naval base in World War II. A road connected it to Balangiga and other towns in southern Samar, but the road leading north ended at Matarinao Bay. Connection with the rest of Samar was by sea. The economy was dependent mainly on copra and coconut products, and rice and fish fed the population.¹

Guiuan did have a strategic position, with the Pacific Ocean (Philippine Sea) on its east, and Leyte Gulf on its west. The Spaniards had built a massive church here which served both as a landmark for incoming galleons, as well as a defensive fortification against hostile raids.

The municipality lay along the typhoon belt and had been periodically ravaged by typhoons. The church had always served as a place of refuge in those trying times.

When World War II broke out, the isolation of Guiuan did not spare it from Japanese rule. The Japanese presence in Samar was relatively small during the occupation, but it was felt. The Japanese

needed copra, and the strategic location of Guiuan was something they could not ignore. Patrols came and went, and impositions were forced upon the people. At one point, the Japanese military administration demanded that the church be turned into a barracks for Japanese troops. The 80-year Filipino priest answered defiantly, "I have lived here all my life. I shall die here. Whether sooner or later, peacefully, or violently, makes no difference." The Japanese backed off.²

One reason why the Japanese may have withdrawn, at least temporarily, was because a guerrilla resistance group had been established in southern Samar. Its leader, Manuel Valley, had been a former Manila policeman who had fought Bataan as an officer of the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). When Bataan fell, Lieutenant Valley escaped and made his way back to Guiuan, his hometown. He appointed himself a captain and organized a volunteer guerrilla force covering Guiuan, Salcedo, Balangiga, Basey and Pambujan Sur. While small, it did maintain peace and in the Southern Samar towns. Valley became Captain in the guerrillas and was reported to be fair to the people, encouraging projects which helped the people. Food production was increased, roads and piers were maintained, thus winning the support of the people. Civil government was established under the guerrillas, and guerrilla currency was mimeographed, serving the financial needs of the people. MacArthur's intelligence staff commented that "the people have given whole-hearted support to him and trust the army implicitly."³ Until the war ended, however, the emergency would continue, and the people looked forward to the return of General MacArthur.

MacArthur Returns to Leyte - and Samar

Apart from the much-publicized invasion of Leyte, Southern Samar was also part of the initial operations to liberate the Philippines from Japanese rule. A unit of MacArthur's forces, the 8th Cavalry Regiment of the 1st Cavalry Division, landed in Southwestern Samar on 23 October 1944, just three days after "A-Day" - the invasion of Leyte proper. The regiment had the mission of occupying the southwestern section of Samar in order to secure the northern flank

of the Leyte operations. This the regiment was able to do against little Japanese opposition.⁴

In December, the 8th Cavalry was given the green light to proceed north to Wright town and capture the terminus of the cross-island road. From there the regiment advanced to Catbalogan, facing increasingly heavy Japanese resistance. Wright was taken on 13 December and Catbalogan, capital of the province of Samar, was taken on 19 December.⁵ But Guiuan was still untouched by all these operations. It would not be long before Guiuan would become the center of massive construction projects.

Original plans for the American forces were to secure the northeastern portion of Leyte and build major air and naval bases there. US Army engineers and US Naval Construction Battalions (NCBs, better known as Seabees) began developing the existing airbases at Tacloban and Dulag and building new ones while establishing a naval base at Tacloban. However, as construction got underway, it was discovered that the terrain in Leyte was not suitable for these major bases. The ground was soft, much of it was composed of rice fields, swampy or unstable ground. Compounding matters was the fact that October and November were the typhoon season, and the heavy rains turned roads and prospective airfields into muddy fields. It became impractical to build anything more than temporary or small-scale bases.⁶

Guiuan is Chosen

Since Leyte was untenable as a major ground base, alternative locations were sought. Survey teams were sent to southwestern Samar. They looked into San Antonio, Basey and environs. The reports were not optimistic - the ground was also soft and muddy, and there was no immediate source of filling material.⁷

Commander Bradford M. Bowker, Officer in Charge of the 61st Naval Construction Battalion, believed Guiuan was best suited as a future base. He and a team of three other officers and one geologist proceeded to the peninsula, unsure of whether it was in

Japanese hands. They landed on 23 November and were greeted with open arms by the residents, now-Major Manuel Valley and his brother and members of their guerrilla band. They believed that MacArthur himself had come to liberate them. The people were a bit disappointed when they learned Commander Bowker was a Construction Battalion officer and not MacArthur, but the celebrations continued nonetheless. Guiuan was free from the threat of the return of the Japanese. Commander Bower wrote an "enthusiastic report" recommending developing the airbase in Guiuan.⁸

Much fighting had taken place in the meantime. The Japanese had sent the bulk of their Combined Fleet to challenge the American landings on Leyte in late October. These ships were decisively beaten. Air attacks threatened the ships in Leyte Gulf, and many were hit by bombs of *Kamikaze* aircraft. The damaged ships had no choice but to withdraw across the Pacific to the nearest naval base at Ulithi, or even further east to Guam or Pearl Harbor. There were no suitable repair facilities in the Philippines. The ever-pressing threat of Japanese air raids meant that a major air base had to be put into operation as soon as possible. Furthermore, US patrol craft had to be based on Philippine soil to interdict Japanese reinforcement convoys bound for Leyte. Leyte's airfields were insufficient.

Foreseeing the successful end of the Leyte campaign, a major air base would also be needed for bombers that would attack targets in the northern and central Philippines, and even Taiwan and Borneo. For future amphibious operations, a major supply base would also be needed.

Guiuan was seen as the answer to these basic and immediate needs (see Fig. 1): An air base to provide air cover for Leyte-Samar operations, attack Japanese ships in the area, and bomb targets for the next offensive.⁹ A ship repair base to work on damaged ships so they could be placed into operation sooner, without having to cross the Pacific for major repairs. A supply depot to house all the materiel needed for future operations. And a hospital to care for casualties in the battlefronts.¹⁰

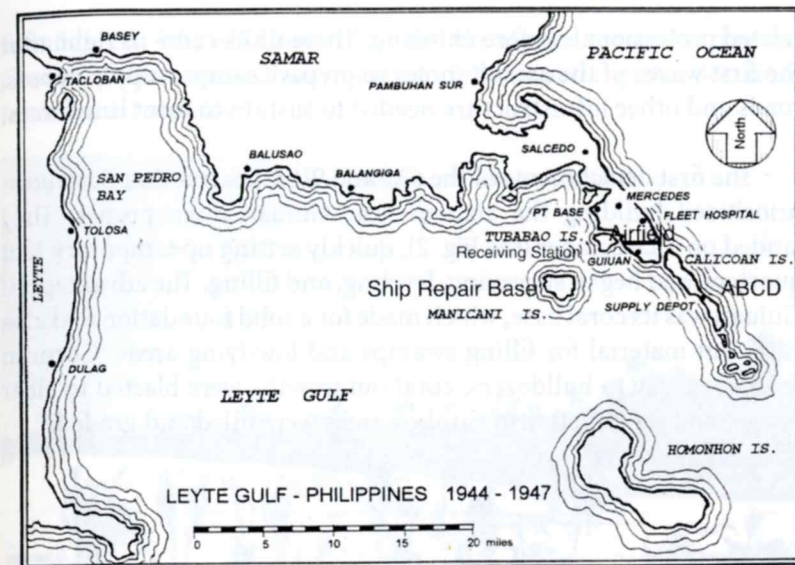


Fig. 1. Guiuan was chosen as the site of an airbase and a naval base on Samar Island.

There was one feature that the naval board recognized: it was typhoon prone. Thus, all construction was to be temporary, to immediately meet the needs of the war. This would not be a permanent base, and its future would depend on the needs after the war.¹¹

Building the Base

Once the plans were approved, the appropriate Seabee units were chosen and moved into the area. The Guiuan base complex was to be a naval base, and thus all construction was undertaken by Seabee units. Due to the exigencies of the Philippine campaign, the all-important Guiuan Field would be jointly used by the US Army Air Force, and the necessary inter-service liaison agreements were made.¹²

1. Guiuan Airfield

The first Seabee units assigned to Samar were the 63rd and 91st Naval Construction Battalions (NCB). The Seabees were a special, noncombatant unit of the US Navy, approximately composed of five hundred men who had been engineers, draftsmen, surveyors or other

related professionals before enlisting. These units came in right after the first waves of the assault forces to prepare camps, supply depots, roads and other infrastructure needed to sustain to front line forces.

The first detachments of the 63rd and 91st Construction Battalions prioritized building the airstrip near Guiuan town proper. They landed on 1 December (see Fig. 2), quickly setting up temporary tent quarters, and began surveying, leveling, and filling. The advantage of Guiuan was its coral base, which made for a solid foundation and also sufficient material for filling swamps and low-lying areas. Coconut trees gave way to bulldozers, coral outgrowths were blasted to clear the ground for the airstrip. Sunken areas were filled and graded.¹³

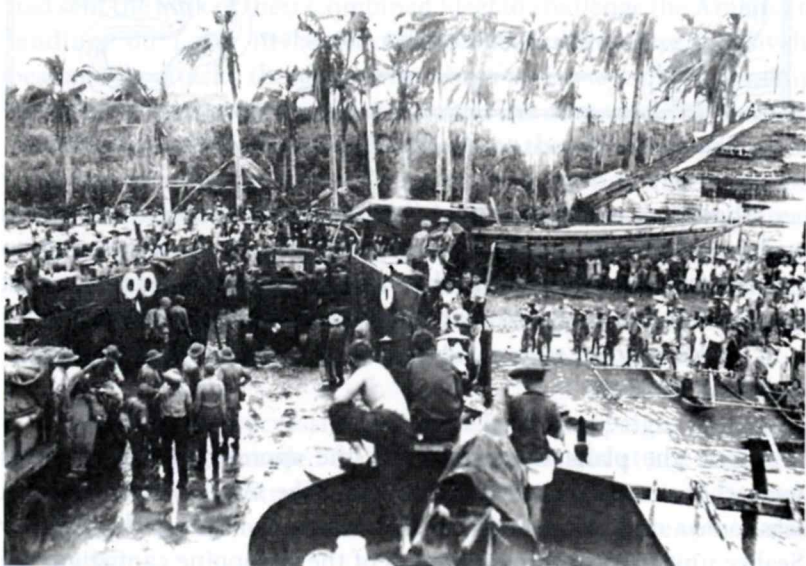


Fig. 2. The 91st Naval Construction Battalion lands in Guiuan.

Corollary to all this planned construction was the procurement of land – through lease or sale – from the residents. Some of them had to be moved to other locations to provide for the right of way for the airfield and subsequent projects.

Work began on 5 December and by 18 December, the field – very crude still – had taken shape. The first plane – a light liaison L-5 aircraft – landed (see Fig. 3). By early January, the field received its

first fighters: F4U-1D Corsairs for the US Marine Corps Marine Air Group 14. They immediately began to provide aerial protection from Japanese air attacks.¹⁴

Fig. 3. First plane lands at Guiuan Airfield on 18 December 1944.



The field had been hurriedly placed into operation and suffered from many imperfections: rough coral shards which blew tires and made landing and taking off dangerous. In the early days of operations many accidents were reported. But construction continued, and after a few months the airfield had reached its full dimensions – 7000 feet by 100 feet, with some taxiways and parking areas.¹⁵

The original plans called for a second field, and eventually that was finished by mid-1945.

2. Naval Station, Samar

An administrative command was needed to consolidate all supply operations in the Guiuan area. This was the Naval Station, Samar, which came under the operation command of Naval Operational Base, Leyte. A headquarters was necessary: this was initially housed in the municipal schoolhouse close to the center of town (see Fig. 4). Port facilities were quickly built to allow ships to unload directly near the town. The first ship was able to dock on Christmas Day, but that day also saw a Japanese air attack which succeeded in damaging the ship. At the same time, Naval Station Samar was formally established.¹⁶



Fig. 4. The headquarters of the Naval Station Samar was initially housed at the municipal school building near (left) the town center.

The Seabees quickly built Quonset huts to house the offices and warehouses of the station. These were built within the *población*. Headquarters Naval Station Samar transferred to its own buildings when complete, and the school was vacated on 16 July 1945. The Seabees restored the school, and it opened to classes the first time since the war began.¹⁷

Under Naval Station Samar were the Naval Supply Depot, which was built on the western side of Calicoan; and Advance Base Construction Depot on the eastern side of Calicoan; a Ship Repair Base on Manicani, a ship watering facility in Bolusao. In early 1945, as the war progressed, it was determined that a Receiving Station where transient naval personnel could be housed was needed. Thus, an extensive grouping of barracks and housing facilities was built in Tubabao.¹⁸

Construction of all these large-scale projects commenced simultaneously as the airfield was being improved. The most common structures built were Quonset huts: prefabricated metal semi-cylindrical building, with cement flooring (see Fig. 5). These were built to standard dimensions and were temporary structures with steel frames covered with galvanized iron. They were multi-purpose buildings, and could serve as offices, barracks, or warehouses. These

quickly became common sights throughout all naval facilities in the Guiuan area.



Fig. 5. The most common military structures built in Guiuan were the Quonset huts.

In addition to the Quonset huts were frame buildings, wooden buildings, and repair facilities. Semi-underground ammunition depots were built. Extensive road networks were cleared from jungle and coral growths to connect the various buildings. Bridges connecting the mainland with Calicoan and Tubabao were built. Piers and docks, electrical generators and wiring, water tanks and distribution pipelines, telephone and radio communications facilities were all built at the same time.

3. Other Naval Facilities

Operating outside of the jurisdiction of the Naval Station Samar were two other US naval facilities. One was a large hospital north of Guiuan, and the other was a Motor Torpedo Boat (or Patrol Torpedo - PT) base at Bobon Point, near the town of Salcedo. Various other Seabee units constructed there very rapidly.

Mud and occasional Japanese threats, as well as the shortage of necessary heavy equipment, initially delayed progress for all construction projects, but these were eventually overcome by the arrival of the dry season, Filipino-Americans in the 1st Filipino Regiment, US Army and civilian workers from outside the Guiuan area.¹⁹

Operations

Guiuan Air Base

Since the airfield had top priority, it was the first project that was put into operation. The first fighters – US Marine F4U-1D Corsairs of MAG 14 – arrived on 9 January 1945 (see Fig. 6), and immediately began providing air cover for the Leyte-Samar area. This significantly reduced the threat of Japanese air attacks on the ground forces and installations being built.²⁰



Fig. 6. An F4U Corsair of the US Marines at the Guiuan Air Base in Samar.

Since the use of the base was rushed, the field itself was not free from imperfections and the Corsairs suffered a number of accidents: tires ripped by coral shards, planes overshooting the runway, or malfunctions due to technical issues.

Equally rushed was the need to use the base as an operational bomber base, to project strategic air power beyond the Leyte-Samar area. The 22nd Bomb Group, operating B-24 heavy bombers (see Fig. 7), advanced to the field by mid-January and began planning long-range missions right away. Their first target were industrial facilities in Taiwan – the first ground-based attacks of the war on the Japanese-

colonized island. Unfortunately, an accident in the field delayed the flight, which was redirected to targets in northern Luzon. The attack on Taiwan was rescheduled but had to be cancelled when a collision between one of the Marine Corsairs and the lead bomber of the bomb group resulted in the destruction of at least two planes, and the death of the bomber group commander. Succeeding missions managed to bomb Taiwan.²¹



Fig. 7. B-24 planes of the 22nd Bomb Group at Guiuan Air Base.

At first the field was quite bare, with little flight facilities. Runway lights had to be improvised, communication facilities were poor, and the field itself turned muddy after heavy rains. A functional tower was built. Parking areas were limited, and planes were arranged wingtip to wingtip. Conditions became more crowded when Navy patrol bomber squadrons, transport planes, air-sea rescue aircraft moved in.

As time went on, conditions in the field improved, and work was begun on the second major runway. Eventually that was completed, along with taxiways, parking stands and maintenance areas. By mid-1945, Guiuan airfield was one of the biggest operational fields in the Philippines, second only to Clark Field (see Fig. 8). Guiuan field had been in operation long before Clark had been captured and repaired, and thus filled the need for a major air base unit until Clark was operational.

Even after Clark Field came back into operation, the bombers, fighters, search and rescue aircraft remained active. Guiuan was closer to Guam and Pearl Harbor than Clark, and its bombers continued to attack Japanese targets north and south of the Philippines. A second US Army Air Force Bomb Group, the 5th



Fig. 8. The Guiuan Air Base at its zenith in 1945.

Bomb Group, moved in in March 1945 as the 22nd Bomb Group advanced to Okinawa. A Navy attack patrol bomber squadron using twin-engine PV-1 Ventura bombers attacked shipping and targets of opportunity in Philippine and Borneo waters. Other Navy patrol bombers squadrons – equipped with long range PB4Y-2 Privateers – also arrived for operations. The Marine Corps Corsairs supported ground units in support missions.²²

Protecting the field were Filipino guerrillas who were stationed around the air base complex. At one point, Filipino-Americans belonging to the 1st Filipino Infantry also provided security.²³

Naval Station Samar

The administrative organization of Naval Station Samar was already operating even before it had a permanent office in Samar. When the commander, Captain R.M. Portson, moved to Samar on 5 January 1945, he maintained his headquarters in the municipal schoolhouse until the appropriate Quonset hut was built.²⁴

Commander Naval Station Samar ensured that the operations of the four major unit under his command – the Naval Supply Depot (in

Calicoan), the Advance Base Construction Depot (also in Calicoan), the Ship Repair Base (in Manicani), and the Receiving Station (in Tubabao) functioned smoothly.

Particularly important was the Ship Repair Base (see Fig. 9). Workshops, docks, warehouses and quarters were built in record time, and damaged ships soon came in for repairs. The base could easily handle small craft such as landing craft and patrol vessels. But Guiuan's importance was that it would become the major repair facility west of Guam – and Pearl Harbor. Ships operating in the Philippines were subject to Japanese air attacks, particularly *Kamikaze* strikes, and while the most seriously damaged ships had no choice but to proceed to Pearl Harbor or the mainland USA, less severely damaged vessels could be repaired and placed back into action sooner in Guiuan. As the American offensive moved closer to Japan – to Iwo Jima and Okinawa – ships that were struck there made their way to Guiuan where repairs could be made.



Fig. 9. The Ship Repair Base on Manicani Island west of Guiuan.

Floating dry docks were towed across the Pacific to accommodate ships needing major repair and upkeep. The largest floating drydocks of the US Navy, the Advance Base Sectional Drydocks (ABSD), were brought in and the first one was in operation by the end of May. The ABSDs were so large they could handle battleships

and aircraft carriers. The first battleship to be enter ABSD-5 was the *USS Mississippi*, which had been damaged off Okinawa (see Fig. 10). The repair base also tended to ships that were damaged during typhoons.



Fig. 10. The battleship *USS Mississippi* in the ABSD-5 floating drydock off Manicani Island.

It was imperative that the repair base be ready to handle more damaged ships as the potential invasion of Japan neared.

The Navy Supply Depot (NSD) and the Advance Base Construction Depot (ABCD), both on Calicoan,²⁵ housed supplies of all sorts needed by ships at sea (see Fig. 11). The ABCD was a vast covered storage area for construction equipment and materials: heavy equipment, lumber, prefabricated buildings – everything that was needed to construct bases close to and even on Japan.

The NSD served its purpose, supplying the fast aircraft carrier task forces and even the British Pacific Fleet, which anchored in Leyte Gulf in mid-1945.²⁶

Fig. 11. The Naval Supply Depot (NSD), left, and the Advance Base Construction Depot (ABCD), right, on Calicoan Island.



The ABCD received supplies and materials mainly aimed at supplying landing forces in the invasion of Japan. The first of these, Operation Coronet, a massive assault landing on Kyushu, was planned for November 1945. A second landing, Operation Olympic, on Honshu itself, was planned for January 1946. Both the ABCD and NSD had to store enough materials for these major operations, and ships from the US continually arrived to unload tons of cargo. These were stockpiled in the warehouses of ABCD.

As the war continued, several Seabee units were assigned to Calicoan not so much for additional construction work, but to be prepared to move out when the invasion of Japan started. Calicoan thus housed perhaps the largest concentration of Naval Construction Battalions in the Pacific War.

The Receiving Station on Tubabao (see Fig. 12) was also designed with the invasion of Japan in mind. Quarters – Quonset huts and frame buildings – were built to accommodate up to 30,000 naval personnel. These were transients, not yet assigned to any particular ship or command, or stopping by en route to their ship or assignment. It was anticipated that thousands of men would be injured or killed in the operations leading to and during the invasion of Japan. The

Fig. 12. Aerial photo of the Receiving Station on Tubabao Island.



Receiving Station would house replacements to fill the vacancies caused by battle casualties. It began operating on 31 July 1945 and began to receive its first transients.

PT Boat Base 17

Operating under Motor Torpedo Boats, Seventh Fleet – and thus not under Naval Station Samar – was the PT Boat base at Bobon Point, near the town of Salcedo (see Fig. 13). This was quickly built by the Seabees working around the clock and became operational in March 1945. The urgency of having a major PT Boat base in the Central Philippines early on was such that even before the base was fully equipped, it was commissioned as PT Boat Base 17. Several PT boat squadrons were assigned to it, and the docks were large enough to accommodate around 150 boats at one time.²⁷



Fig. 13. Aerial photo of the PT Boat Base 17 at Bobon Point.

The base contained all the facilities needed to keep PT boats operational: fueling equipment, torpedo storage, provisions, repair facilities, and ground quarters for the crews. In addition, several maintenance ships were anchored close by to provide all services that the ground base could not.

The PT boats based in PT Boat Base 17 patrolled the waters of the Eastern Philippines; some proceeded as far as Mindanao, Sulu, and Borneo and supported landings there. There being no Japanese maritime traffic, however, there was little actual action that the PTs encountered.

As in the case of Calicoan, the base handled several PT boat squadrons: nine in July 1945. These would be made ready for the invasion of Japan. The PT base was the largest and most complete PT base in the whole world.²⁸

Fleet Hospital #114

The original plans for the naval hospital called for a 9,000-bed capacity complex. This was later downgraded to a 3,000-bed facility,

located about five miles north of Guiuan. Construction began in April, for a projected complex of 311 prefabricated buildings. By 2 July 1945, the hospital was ready to accommodate 1,500 patients. A week later, an additional 500 beds were ready. The entire complex was completed by 15 September 1945. Even prior to completion it was designated as Fleet Hospital #114 (see Fig. 14), under the operational command of the 7th Fleet.²⁹



Fig. 14. Aerial photo of the Fleet Hospital #114 in Guiuan.

The hospital was specially built to care for casualties expected in the invasion of Japan. Hence its size. Doctors and nurses were assigned accordingly. The hospital's first major influx of patients were survivors of the *USS Indianapolis*, which was sunk by a Japanese submarine while enroute to the Philippines.³⁰

All the bases and units assigned in the Guiuan area had their own recreational facilities – baseball fields, open air theaters, cafeterias, and even libraries. Popular American composer Irving Berlin and his troupe came to Guiuan to stage an extravaganza musical, “This is the Army.” Other United Service Organizations (USO) groups came to provide entertainment. There were regular movie showings as well. Each base had its own chapel, and the various units had their respective mimeographed newspapers, which reported not only news of the war but also local conditions. The newspaper of the Naval Station Samar was called the *Typhoon Express*; that of the 33rd Special Naval Construction Battalion Seabees was the *Guiuan News*.³¹

As there was little threat of hostile Japanese action, life on the bases became routine. Construction work continued at a fast pace, and the piers and docks were busy as ships unloaded cargo and personnel. The repair base worked round the clock to repair damaged vessels.

Relations with People

The naval base and airfield complex did not operate in a vacuum. The Navy men interacted with the local people on several levels: there were land leases to work out as the bases took up private land; local women offered to do the laundry for the sailors; and entrepreneurs set up shops that sold souvenirs. Some women were hired as secretaries and office assistants. Many men were hired for additional construction work and additional labor in the repair base. The town could not provide for the labor needs of the bases, and many Filipinos from outside the municipality came in to fill the job vacancies. There was thus an influx of outsiders which swelled Guiuan's population.

Casual fraternizing between US military personnel and the locals was discouraged, lest it leads to unfortunate incidents. Sailors were warned not to enter people's homes or become too familiar with the locals. At times, the civilian areas were declared off limits.³²

Mixing was inevitable, and some of the sailors strolled around Guiuan, watched cockfights, tried the local food and bought souvenirs (see Fig. 15). A major parade was held to celebrate US Independence Day, July 4.

The abrupt conversion of the Guiuan area from a simple town to a massive naval and air base caused some residents to lament the change and longed for the older, less “modern” times.³³

But the bases were built, and history could not be erased.

End of the War and the Fate of the Bases

On 15 August 1945, news that Japan had finally accepted the terms of the Potsdam Declaration and surrendered to the Allies swept the naval bases. There was massive celebration: searchlights lit the night sky, and firearms were fired in celebration. The war was finally over. A big parade was held in Guiuan's main streets (see Fig. 16) to celebrate the occasion.³⁴



Fig. 15. A souvenir store caters to the demands of the US military personnel stationed in Guiuan.

This meant that the invasion of Japan for which the Guiuan complex had been gearing for would not happen. Sailors wanted to go home as soon as possible, and the men began counting their points to figure out how soon they could return home.

Ships coming to Guiuan, however, continued to disgorge large amounts of supplies – they had been at sea for months and could not be turned around that simply. The departing ships carried as many sailors homeward bound as they could carry.

Units were disestablished as soon as possible. Among the first to go were the PT boat squadrons at PT Boat Base 17. The squadrons began closing shop as early as October, and most had ceased to exist by the end of November. The men went back to the US. The large number of PT boats, now no longer needed, were inspected and decommissioned. Equipment that could be reused was salvaged. The boats themselves – built of plywood – were burned at the beach. The fires could be seen from as far as Manicani. Some sailors wondered



Fig. 16. A V-J Day parade along the main streets of Guiuan marked the end of World War II.

whether it would have been better to have turned over the boats to the local residents, who could at least have made use of the wood.

Munitions were similarly not needed but posed danger if left untended. It was decided to dump bombs, warheads and other explosives out at sea. The process of disposing these bombs led to a massive explosion on 21 August 1945. The cause was never determined, but several men were killed, and debris rained around a large part of the area, some pieces of metal landing in the town proper.³⁵

So many Americans left for home that there were not enough men left to sort, properly store, and guard the now surplus equipment and supplies of war. This led to chaos, with no adequate cataloging and storage resulting in a lot of waste. Boxes were stored out in the open, where many rotted. Inventories were incomplete and inaccurate. The presence of so much unguarded supplies led to pilfering and looting.³⁶

The result was tension between Filipinos and Americans. Some American officers became very strict with Filipinos; Filipinos in turn wrote letters explaining their situation and complaining of discriminatory treatment.

Some materials were given to the Philippine government, as part of rehabilitation payments, but not all could be accounted for.

For a while it seemed that the bases could continue as US naval facilities. The Military Bases Agreement of 1947 included the Leyte-Samar bases among those that could be retained by the US. President Manuel Roxas reported to the US State Department that he or his representatives had consulted with the people of Guiuan and that they had unanimously supported the idea of the bases remaining.³⁷

But parts of the base were either no longer important or useful. The PT Boat base closed down before the end of 1945. The hospital, which never functioned to capacity, shut down later. The supply depots stored surplus material, now that the war was over. The Ship Repair Base was potentially useful, but it was becoming redundant with the development of the US Navy bases at Cavite and Subic. The air base could still be useful, and by 1946 an Air-Sea Rescue squadron was based there. But the crowded plane line up was gone (see Fig. 17).

The last bases were eventually closed in mid-1947. Some of them were turned over to the Philippine government; others were simply abandoned. The last sailors of the Repair Base left in mid-1947 without fanfare, seen off only by weeping women, some of whom were pregnant.³⁸

Issues remained with the bases: the leases and paperwork had to be concluded, environmental impact assessed, and long-term consequences to the people of Guiuan studied. Without adequate maintenance, many of the buildings and roads deteriorated and returned to nature.

Since most of the buildings were meant to be temporary, they did not last. Some of those in Tubabao (the former Receiving Station) were used in 1949 to house White Russian refugees from China. The airfield remains operational. But the rest of the structures seem to have disappeared – the ubiquitous Quonset huts are gone. Most appear to have been destroyed by typhoons.³⁹



Fig. 17. Guiuan Air Base after World War II.

What is left? Not much. ABCD Beach is a name that derives from the supply depot's name. A flagpole, cement foundations, some of the road network, the airfield remain. But few people now remember that the bases did exist, and that they played a major role in the last months of World War II.

Conclusion

The Guiuan naval and air base were destined to be major bases in the war against Japan, on the same scale as Subic. The Seabees were able to build, in record time, the various facilities in the unspoiled grounds of southeastern Samar. The air base was used against strategic targets on Luzon, the Visayas, Mindanao, Borneo and Taiwan, while providing air cover for ships and facilities in the Leyte-Samar area. This was a key role in the war against Japan. Similarly, the PT Boat base served to protect the waters in the area. The Repair Base was put to good use late in the war. The hospital treated the survivors of the *USS Indianapolis* as well as other sick sailors.

But the complex did not live up to its full potential, because of Japan's unexpected surrender. With the end of World War II, the

main reason for the base's existence disappeared, and it became redundant with the development of other bases in Subic, Cavite and Clark Field. The bases were closed by mid-1947.

As with any major military base, problems relating to the environment, positive and negative impacts on the people were experienced. The bases were nevertheless a big part of Guiuan's history and deserve to be better known.

Notes

All the photos presented in this paper come from the collection of the author.

- ¹ Allied Geographical Section, Southwest Pacific Area, *Terrain Study No. 88, Samar Province (Philippine Series)* (Melbourne: Allied Geographical Section, 1944), 8-9, 16, 30, 41, 58-59, 71; Dear, I am on Calicoan – a Suburb of Guiuan. Mimeographed, c. 1945.
- ² John G. Alnut (ed.), *Contrast: The Story of the Fifth Special Naval Construction Battalion* (N.p.: Benson Publishing Co., n.d), unpaginated.
- ³ Charles A. Willoughby, *The Guerrilla Resistance Movement in the Philippines, 1941-1945* (New York: Vantage Press, 1972), 447-448; Neil Shafer, *Philippine Emergency and Guerrilla Currency of World War II* (Racine, Wisconsin: Whitman Coin Products, 1974), 329-354.
- ⁴ Sixth United States Army, *Report of the Leyte Operation 20 October 1944-25 December 1944*, 3, 20; *The Reports of General MacArthur, Vol. I: The Campaigns of MacArthur in the Pacific* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1966), 186.
- ⁵ B.C. Wright, *The First Cavalry Division in World War II* (Tokyo: Toppan Printing Co., 1947), 78-79, 89-91, 98; 6A 71, 79.

- ⁶ *Building the Navy's Bases in World War II: History of the Bureau of Docks and the Civil Engineer Corps 1940-1946, Vol. 2* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1947), 381; Worrall Reed Carter, *Beans, Bullets, and Black Oil: The Story of Fleet Logistics Afloat in the Pacific during World War II* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953), 374-375; U.S. Naval Operating Base Leyte Gulf and U.S. Naval Station Guiuan, Samar, *War Diary, 20 Oct 1944 to 31 May 1945, Vol. 1* (henceforth NOB War Diary); J.M. Shoemaker, *A History of Naval Air Base, Samar from 23 December 1944 to 1 July 1945*.
- ⁷ Carter, 374-375, Shoemaker; "Seabees First Ashore on Samar," in [https://www.seabees93.net/MEM-SAMAR-NCB Newspaper-Guiuan.htm](https://www.seabees93.net/MEM-SAMAR-NCB>Newspaper-Guiuan.htm), accessed on 11 May 2022; "NAB Samar Report," in NOB War Diary, 1-2.
- ⁸ "Seabees First Ashore on Samar," in [https://www.seabees93.net/MEM-SAMAR-NCB Newspaper-Guiuan.htm](https://www.seabees93.net/MEM-SAMAR-NCB>Newspaper-Guiuan.htm), accessed on 11 May 2022; NOB War Diary, 2-3.
- ⁹ The invasion of Leyte was the first of MacArthur's offensives to be out of reach of land-based air support and was temporarily supported by aircraft carriers for air cover. But these aircraft carriers were not under MacArthur's command and could be moved out of Philippine waters if the need be. Thus, the importance of land air bases.
- ¹⁰ Shoemaker History.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² NOB War Diary, 2.
- ¹³ *Building the Navy's Bases*, 383.
- ¹⁴ Shoemaker History.
- ¹⁵ *Building the Navy's Bases*, 383.

- 16 NOB War Diary, 2-3; Carter, 375.
- 17 *Naval Station Samar War Diary, July-August 1945.*
- 18 For details of construction, see the various Seabee Cruise Books in <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/seabee/explore/wwii-cruisebooks.html>, Accessed in May 2022; *Building the Navy's Bases*, 383-385, and Carter, 376-377.
- 19 Shoemaker History.
- 20 Charles W. Boggs, Jr., *Marine Aviation in the Philippines* (Washington: Historical Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1951), 49-50; Shoemaker History.
- 21 Boggs, 51-52; Walter Gaylor, et al., *Revenge of the Red Raiders: The Illustrated History of the 22nd Bombardment Group during World War II* (Boulder, CO: International Research and Publishing Co., 2006), 363-367.
- 22 Gaylor, et al., 367-382; 13th Air Force, *The Story of the Fifth Bombardment Group (Heavy)*, (Raleigh, NC: Hillsborough House, 1946), unpaginated; various mission reports and war diaries of the different US Marine and US Navy air units; Shoemaker History.
- 23 Shoemaker History.
- 24 NOB War Diary, 4.
- 25 Due to secrecy requirements, Calicoan was first known as Island X.
- 26 NOB War Diary, 11.
- 27 Robert J. Bulkley, Jr., *At Close Quarters: PT Boats in the United States Navy* (Washington: Naval History Division, 1962), 418; war diaries of the different PT Boat squadrons.

- 28 Ibid., 418.
- 29 *Building the Navy's Bases*, 383; NOB War Diary.
- 30 *Naval Station Samar War Diary, August 1945.* The Indianapolis had carried some components of the atom bomb to Tinian prior to its ill-fated voyage towards the Philippines.
- 31 These shows and newspapers are dutifully reported – with photographs – in the various Seabee cruise books.
- 32 See the different Seabee cruise books; Manicani Island Association, *We Remember Manicani: Fiftieth Anniversary Recollections: An Informal History of the U.S. Navy on Manicani Island, Philippines, 1944-1947* (Mattoon, IL: Manicani Island Association, 1994), 125, 135-148.
- 33 Some of the Seabee newspapers reflected this; cf., *We Remember Manicani*, 135-148; Seabee cruise books.
- 34 Each person in Guiuan had his/her own memories of the V-J Day celebration. They are vividly recounted in the Seabee cruise books and in *We Remember Manicani*, 326-327.
- 35 *Naval Station Samar War Diary, August 1945; We Remember Manicani*, 259.
- 36 *We Remember Manicani*, 344-377.
- 37 U.S. State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Vol. 6: Far East* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1972), 1103-1104. The Military Bases Agreement (MBA) official text is in the Republic of the Philippines' *Official Gazette*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (March 1947). Mention of the Leyte-Samar bases is in p. 1033. President Roxas' message to the Philippine Congress regarding the MBA in the same month still mentioned that the US planned to keep the bases in the Guiuan area. See *Official Gazette*, 961.

³⁸ *We Remember Manicani*, 391.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 395. Two typhoons struck in consecutive years: Typhoon Amy (international name) in December 1951 and Typhoon Wilma in 1952.

References

- Allied Geographical Section, Southwest Pacific Area. *Terrain Study No. 88 Samar Province (Philippine Series)*. Melbourne: Allied Geographical Section, 1944.
- Alnut, John G. (ed.). *Contrast: The Story of the Fifth Special Naval Construction Battalion*. N.p.: Benson Publishing Co., n.d. Unpaginated.
- Boggs, Charles Jr. W. *Marine Aviation in the Philippines*. Washington: Historical Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1951.
- Building the Navy's Bases in World War II: History of the Bureau of Docks and the Civil Engineer Corps 1940-1946, Vol. 2*. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1947.
- Bulkley, Robert Jr. J. *At Close Quarters: PT Boats in the United States Navy*. Washington: Naval History Division, 1962.
- Carter, Worrall Reed. *Beans, Bullets, and Black Oil: The Story of Fleet Logistics Afloat in the Pacific during World War II*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953.
- "Dear, I am on Calicoan – a Suburb of Guiuan." Mimeographed, c. 1945.
- Gaylor, Walter, et al. *Revenge of the Red Raiders: The Illustrated History of the 22nd Bombardment Group during World War II*. Boulder, CO: International Research and Publishing Co., 2006.

Manicani Island Association. *We Remember Manicani: Fiftieth Anniversary Recollections: An Informal History of the U.S. Navy on Manicani Island, Philippines, 1944-1947*. Mattoon, IL: Manicani Island Association, 1994.

Naval Station Samar War Diary, July-August 1945.

"Seabees First Ashore on Samar," in <https://www.seabees93.net/MEM-SAMAR-NCB>Newspaper-Guiuan.htm>. Accessed on 11 May 2022

Shafer, Neil. *Philippine Emergency and Guerrilla Currency of World War II*. Racine, Wisconsin: Whitman Coin Products, 1974.

Shoemaker, J.M. *A History of Naval Air Base, Samar from 23 December 1944 to 1 July 1945*.

Sixth United States Army. *Report of the Leyte Operation, 20 October 1944-25 December 1944*. No other publication details.

The Reports of General MacArthur, Vol. I: The Campaigns of MacArthur in the Pacific. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1966.

U.S. Naval Operating Base Leyte Gulf and U.S. Naval Station Guiuan, Samar. *War Diary, 20 Oct 1944 to 31 May 1945, Vol. 1*.

U.S. State Department. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Vol. 6: Far East*. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1972.

Willoughby, Charles A. *The Guerrilla Resistance Movement in the Philippines, 1941-1945*. New York: Vantage Press, 1972.

"World War II Cruise Books – Seabees," in <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/seabee/explore/wwii-cruisebooks.html>. Accessed in May 2022.

Wright, B.C. *The First Cavalry Division in World War II*. Tokyo: Toppan Printing Co., 1947.