

## Unit 37: New Caledonia - Allied headquarters

*Ann Berode*

### *Noumea, New Caledonia*

In Europe, on 3 September 1939, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. After the German invasion of France, in June 1940, Marshall Petain signed an armistice with Hitler and the seat of French Government was transferred to Vichy.

In New Caledonia, a French overseas Territory, colonists and Kanaks remained loyal to the Vichy Government until 19 September 1940. There was strong opposition by a large part of the population, who supported the “Free French” government, now in exile in Britain and led by General Charles DeGaulle. In September, Governor Sautot gained the support of New Caledonians for DeGaulle. Volunteers from the French territories soon formed the *Pacific Battalion*.

In 1942, the war came directly to New Caledonia. On 12 March 1942, some 17,000 Allied soldiers landed in Noumea, the capital. New Caledonia then became the Command Centre of Allied military operations in the Pacific, uniting Americans, Australians and New Zealanders in the battle against the Japanese invasion. Bombers that took off from New Caledonia headed for the Solomon Islands and the Coral Sea. The great battles of the Pacific were planned in New Caledonia.

The Americans built many airstrips and hospitals during the War, and wounded and Allied soldiers received medical treatment in New Caledonia. In all, over one million American, Australian and New Zealand soldiers spent time in New Caledonia during that period. At any given time, about 120,000 troops were stationed – which more than tripled the combined French settler and Kanak population.

The Second World War significantly changed the way of life, but it was for only a brief period, and the impact was concentrated around bases, airfields and wharf districts.

(Note: After the war, the Command Centre became the Headquarter building for the South Pacific Commission, now called the Secretariat for the Pacific Community.. “Car pool” is still the name of one of Noumea’s suburbs.)