

Irregular Warfare and the Vandalia Expedition in Fiji, 1859

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Irregular operations have a long history in the U.S. Navy. From cutting out expeditions against West Indian privateers in the 1790s, the sailing Navy's version of visit-board-and-search operations off Tripoli in 1801 or skirmishes against rioters or Chinese troops during the Taiping rebellion in 1855, American Sailors were comfortable conducting irregular or *ad hoc* combat operations ashore. Under the command of skilled officers and experienced chief petty officers, veteran Sailors put the mission first, accomplishing remarkable feats at a then acceptable cost in lives. One of many examples took place in the South Pacific in the 1850s, an area of great interest to American merchants and traders.

It was cold and dark at 0300 on 9 October 1859 when the 40 Sailors and 10 Marines under Lt. Charles Caldwell prepared for battle, arming themselves with minié rifles, swords and a wheeled 12-pounder howitzer. Their ship, the chartered schooner *Mechanic* lay off Waya, a small, rugged island at the western edge of the Fiji archipelago. The expedition intended to climb the steep hills, pass into the interior and, as put by Lt. Caldwell in his diary, "destroy the town [of Somatti] and bring the natives to an engagement - It was a novel undertaking to assault and destroy a mountain tribe in their stronghold with a party of Seamen."

The Sailors and Marines had arrived in Fiji a week earlier in sloop-of-war *Vandalia*, four months after departing Panama for a patrol among the islands of the South Pacific. Tasked with aiding Americans shipwrecked or in need of assistance, the warship had already rescued forty men of the clipper ship *Wild Wave*, wrecked on her passage from San Francisco to Valparaiso. Upon arrival at Ovalau, Fiji, on 2 October, the American consul came aboard *Vandalia* and reported "that two men had been eaten by the natives of Waya." Upon receiving this news, Capt. Arthur Sinclair ordered Lt. Caldwell, a veteran officer with 20 years of service, to take fifty men and bring the murderers to justice.

During their passage to the island, Lt. Caldwell's expedition heard many stories from towns and villages about the ferocious warriors of Waya. Indeed, the Navy Sailors even received a message from the Wayans, who said, "Do you suppose we have killed the two white men for nothing? No, we killed them and we have eaten them. We are great warriors, and we delight in war..." After hearing this and other tales, Lt. Caldwell wrote "...and woe to the members of any strange tribe that falls into their hands... to be clubbed to death and eaten is the only alternative for the captive. It is not a matter of surprise that

the tribes along our route learned with feelings of satisfaction the nature of our expedition.”

Provided with guides by friendly Fijians, the party debarked and began climbing the hills at 0500. After dragging the howitzer 2,300 feet upwards the rigging parted and the cannon fell back down the hill, breaking the axle. Feeling a bit like Sisyphus, the expedition left the 12-pounder behind and marched on after arming the gun crew with swords and carbines. Picking their way up steep defiles, through crevices, and along precipices with only room for one to pass, they arrived at the town after five hours of strenuous exertions. The natives waited in a final defile, “clothed in their funeral robes of white, with long scarves sweeping over the ground; their hair combed to radiate from this mass, forming an immense rig six feet in circumference.” Lt. Alan Ramsey of the Marines commented laconically that this merely made “them most conspicuous to the marksmen.”

The fifty or so Americans moved left at a run, skirmishing as they moved, the Sailors under the direction of Master’s Mate John K. Bartlett. After flanking the several hundred defenders, they sang the “Red, White, and Blue,” gave three hearty cheers and charged into the town. The howitzer crew took up combustibles and “commencing to leeward and working up to windward,” fired the town. Moving back through the same ravine, with the Marines as rearguard, the Americans were attacked by hundreds of natives with “a heavy discharge of firearms, thrown stones ... heavy clubs, and a flight of arrows... they came quite near, moving with great quickness, but our men returning their fire with a rapid and steady discharge, and after a severe action of 15 or 20 minutes, repulsed them with a heavy loss on their part in killed and wounded.”

Moving downwards with their wounded -- three men had been shot with musket balls, another took an arrow in the leg with two others injured by thrown rocks -- Lt. Ramsey worried that the natives would try to “secure one body, at least, for their horrible feast,” but after an exhausting four hour march the expedition made it safely to sea. Lt. Caldwell carefully noted that while some government property -- two ramrods and one bayonet -- had been lost and a certain amount of powder and ball expended, at least a dozen natives had been killed and several dozen wounded. He received word that evening that the two tribal chiefs were dead, and the town mostly burnt. Justice was served, both physically and psychologically. On the voyage back the expedition stopped at fishing villages to spread the word of victory and receive congratulations.

Of particular interest to readers today is the psychological impact of the expedition. While the death of two enemy leaders was important, both Lt. Caldwell and local Fijians, clearly saw the propaganda effects as the most important outcome of the raid. The very public chastisement of the Wayans, to include an unimpeded march into the hills to kill warriors and burn Somatti without effective resistance, sent an important message to the nearby villages as well as the Fiji archipelago in general. Granted, modern day counter-insurgency operations cannot be anywhere near as cavalier regarding collateral damage, but the psychological effects of operations against enemy support networks should not be discounted.

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