

# N E R V A L ' s      D I A R Y

*Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...*

*Honiara, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, South Pacific,  
September 19, 1995*

## *Austria and the South Pacific*

Álvaro Mendaña de Neira (1541–1595) discovered these islands thought to be fabulously rich in 1568, coming from Callao, Peru. As a group called the Solomons, Guadalcanal island (Guadalcanar of old) was first sighted on April 19, 1568. Pedro de Ortega, his second in command, stepped ashore on April 20, 1568, and named it after his birthplace, the city of Guadalcanal in Spain [1]. (Semantically, the Arab root cannot be overlooked, *وَاد* *uād*, meaning river, and *كَنْار* *kanār*, possibly meaning edge, border.) The *Casa de Austria* reigned that country at the time. Notorious as a battlefield in World War II between August 7, 1942, and February 9, 1943, the island has seen fierce fighting between Americans and Japanese. The 'Iron Bottom Sound' right before Point Cruz where the Spaniards once landed, holds about 50 wrecks of men-of-war of all sizes of both sides, and on two hills towering over the city of Honiara we find monuments by the Allied and the Japanese forces to commemorate the bloody months of yesteryear [2]. But there is also an epitaph of the Imperial Royal Austro-Hungarian Navy, placed in 1901, after a deadly incident involving SMS Albatros, in August 1896. The upcoming centenary and the fact that I had busied myself with these matters (see 'Nerval's Diary' of earlier this year), made me come here with my older son Karl Jr., PhD, a historian, for a 2-day field research.

In pursuit of earlier discoveries, SMS Albatros, a 570-ton vessel, left Pola in the fall of 1895 to sail into Australian and equatorial waters with geological, zoological and botanical objectives [3]. On the island of Guadalcanal, a party headed by the scientific leader of the expedition Heinrich Foulon von Norbeck (1850–1896) attempted to climb a mountain peak (Lion's Head of the British, or Mt. Tatuba or Tatuve, considered taboo by the natives). Both the climbing party and the sailors at the beach camp were attacked. Five men were killed and many more injured [4–6]. The Albatros turned back to the Australian mainland and completed her task in the subsequent year. In February 1901, the cruiser SMS Leopard came to Guadalcanal, and an epitaph referring to the incident and spelling out the names of the slain was erected. Unfortunately, the present-day Austrian archives yield little on the whole story, a fact which in parts is due to the forced

dissipation of archival material in the aftermath World War I, when documents had to be ceded to the succession states of the old monarchy, but also due to loss of material since. Some details can be gleaned from British sources (colonial reports), in Honiara [4]. Interestingly enough, the then responsible civil servant, Her Britannic Majesty's Acting Deputy Commissioner of the Solomon Islands, Charles Woodford, who dutifully mentioned the story in his official report, became a patient aboard the Albatros for 10 days in 1897, because he fell sick and there was no other medical supervision around but on the Austrian vessel [3].

The travel guide of the Solomons (Lonely Planet Series) [7] gives due credit to an 'Austrian Monument' and marks its position in a drawn sketch of the surroundings of Honiara. Being familiar with the basic facts and after a very long search, certain that the epitaph had survived the barrages of World War II, I set my mind on going to this remote place and check the condition of the granite cross. Some hours of sweating in the scorching sun of an equatorial beach were necessary to clean it and to cover the letters on the front of the epitaph's base with gold paint. The local authorities responsible for these matters proved admirably cooperative and friendly. I do hope to raise a few Schillings so as to have renewed the rusty fence around the epitaph, tidy up the place and provide some information on the story to anybody coming there, still before the centennial (August 10, 1996). After all, why should not, next to the giant American and Japanese monuments, also an Austrian epitaph be included in the tourists' path once it exists over there, and 'Austria' not be mistaken for 'Australia'.

- 1 Henze D: Enzyklopädie der Entdecker und Erforscher der Erde. Graz, Akademische Druck- & Verlagsanstalt, vol III, pp 420–433.
- 2 Dugan D (ed): Guadalcanal 1942–1992, Official Souvenir Publication. Chatswood, Mace Marketing, 1992?
- 3 Staatsarchiv, Kriegsarchiv (Marine-Abteilung), Vienna.
- 4 Colonial Reports. Annual, British Solomon Islands. 1897, No 251, pp 27–28; 1900–1901, No 277, p 18.
- 5 Wallisch F: Der Überfall am Berge Tatuve. Alpenbote 1955;10:96–98.
- 6 Lever RA: Pacific Islands Monthly 1963, p 63 (March issue).
- 7 Solomon Islands, Lonely Planet Series, 1993.

*à bientôt,*

*K.H., Vienna*