

W W I I R E M E M B E R E D



DISCOVERING MY FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS

An Astonishing Journey
Through Time

VETERAN REUNION TOUR DIRECTORS

"My Dad stood there 48 years ago." I knew it – could feel it. It was a sensation unlike any I'd ever experienced. My wife, Cristy, and I both felt my father's presence as we stood on Semaphore Hill, high above the harbor of Noumea, New Caledonia, the 264-mile-long French island across the Coral Sea from northeast Australia. It felt so strange that at first we refused to believe it. We thought it was wishful thinking.

by Raymond Harold Pfeiffer



Since 1983 Cristy and I have designed and guided WWII historical tours in Europe. We've coordinated and witnessed countless emotional reunions of veterans with the people they helped liberate.

We've arranged memorial ceremonies at American military cemeteries and helped family members visit relatives' graves. We've coordinated warm welcomes from liberated townsparades, monument dedications and receptions. We've shared many emotional moments with tour members, but only experienced the feelings vicariously.

Cristy and I are both children of world War II vets who served in the Pacific. My Dad, Harold Pfeiffer, died in 1986. He had told me the history of his ship, the George Clymer. It had called on New Caledonia's capital, Noumea, many times in 1943 between operations in the Solomon Islands. My Dad told me that Noumea was a good liberty port and one of the few that the Clymer visited in its busy schedule.

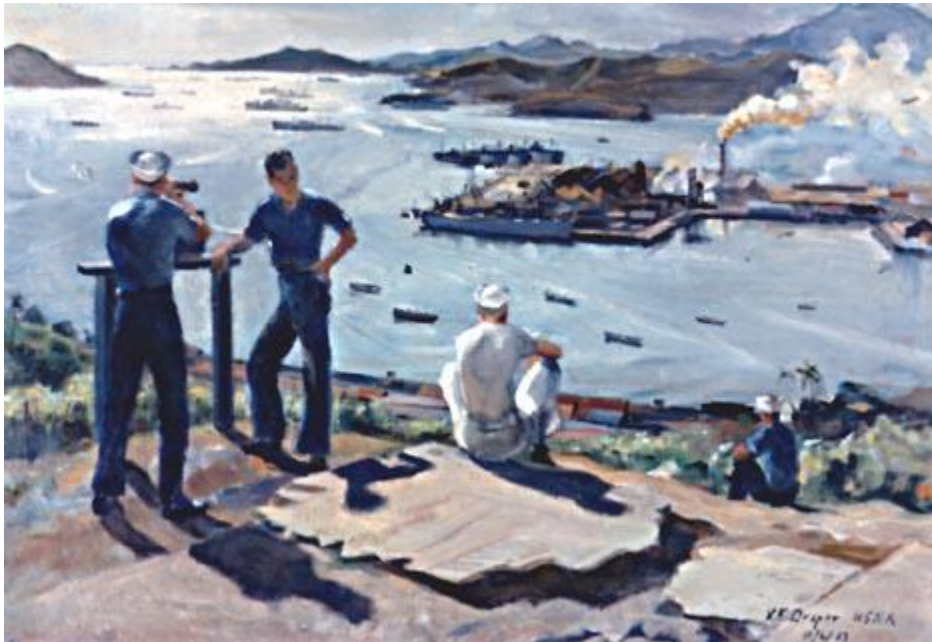
DISCOVERY

Henri Daly, our host in Noumea,

We had not started out to retrace my Dad's world War II

experiences aboard the USS George Clymer (APA-27). We were in New Caledonia to help the government coordinate a 1992 50th anniversary tour and celebration for Americans who were stationed there or passed through during the war.

showed us his extensive collection of World War II books, particularly those relating to New Caledonia's role in the War. Cristy perused a large, leather-bound album of well-reproduced photos of Americans in New Caledonia. As she studied the album, she was transfixed by a reproduction of an official US Navy painting by Lt. William F. Draper, USNR, showing



A reproduction of William F. Draper's original painting now hangs over Pfeiffer's fireplace in Lutz, Florida.

Harold Pfeiffer, Ray's father, is the one facing the artist.

sailors and islanders at Noumea's harbor (National Geographic Magazine, April 1944). I felt something strange about his painting, but I couldn't think why. I remembered my Dad told me he was the subject of a painting in New Caledonia. But in my heart I knew he couldn't be recognized from the painting and that nearly one million servicemen passed through the island during the war how could it be my father?

We borrowed another album from Mr. Daly

The following morning we told our astounded hosts. They immediately took us to Semaphore Hill. We used the painting to locate the exact spot where my Dad stood in 1943 almost 48 years before and 8,500 miles from his home in New Jersey. We were certain it was he. We took slides of us at the same spot. It hadn't changed much-the view is still magnificent.

Upon our return, I told my mother the

and took both to our room. Cristy opened the large volume and turned to the paintings. We both gasped there was my father! We felt an electricity neither of us had ever known. Another Draper painting titled A Lookout on Semaphore Hill, above Noumea, takes a signal from a ship in New Caledonia's "Great Road", showed four sailors looking at the harbor. One of the sailors was my dad! His stance, his tall, lean body and his hairline fit him to the "t"!

Neither Cristy nor I slept well that night. We discussed the possibility of the picture really being him. Hundreds of thousands of sailors passed through Noumea. "How do we know it's him?" I answered my own question. He was a Quartermaster (navigator) and had a good reason to be up on Semaphore Hill. The harbor and dangerous reef would have been of interest to a petty officer who had assisted in navigating the "Great Road," or main channel, to Noumea.

story. She remembered Dad saying he was the subject of a painting in Noumea. We went to the Orlando (Florida) Public Library to get a copy of the April 1943 National Geographic. The series was titled "Jungle War Bougainville and New Caledonia, 17 paintings by William F. Draper." To our astonishment, almost every one of the paintings of Bougainville featured Dad's ship, the Clymer, with PA-27, its hull number, prominently displayed. We were in absolute shock as we sat in the library with the final proof we needed. We also learned the original painting is on display in the Washington Navy Yard.

After experiencing so many emotional events with our WWII tour members, I now had the chance to reach back into time and feel a new closeness with my father. I'm certain he knows we returned to where he no doubt felt fatigue, fear of impending battle and of loneliness when he climbed that hill in Noumea in 1943.



About the author

Ray Pfeiffer and his wife, Cristy, own and operate Historic Tours

The Pfeiffers visited the Naval Historical Center at the Washington Naval Yard to research the history of the USS George Clymer in August, 1991. They ascertained that on October 2, 1943, the date the painting was done, the Clymer was indeed in Noumea, New Caledonia.

The following day, the Pfeiffers were warmly received by the artist, William F. Draper, at his New York City home. Draper confirmed that one of the sailors in the picture was Ray's father, whom he remembered well. Draper also shared reproductions of hundreds of his paintings as both a combat and portrait artist.

The confirmation by Mr. Draper completed an odyssey of time and distance begun in 1943 in the South Pacific and ended in 1991 in New York City.
