



Origins – Volume I:

FINDING THE WARTIME ROOTS OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY FIELD BAND

Reflection on the Americal Division Band *by SFC Brian Eldridge*

In the 1920s and 1930s, Chester “Chet” E. Whiting was a music educator in the Malden, Massachusetts school district, and the commander of the 110th Cavalry Band, Massachusetts National Guard. In 1940, Whiting’s 110th Cavalry Band was redesignated as the 180th Field Artillery Band, and in 1941 sent to Camp Edwards, Cape Cod, assigned to the 26th (Yankee) Division, to prepare for possible entry into World War II. On 23 January 1942, less than two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Chet Whiting, along with his brother Frank and their bandsmen, were departing the Brooklyn Army Terminal on an enormous troop transport, along with 20,000 men in other ships, accompanied by an escort of submarines, destroyers, cruisers, and bombers. As Whiting later recalled, “We were on our way—but none knew where, except the War Department” (*The Baton and the Pendulum*, p. 38).



The 110th Cavalry Band was both a mounted and concert band. (Courtesy of David and George Whiting, sons of Frank B. Whiting)

TASK FORCE 6814

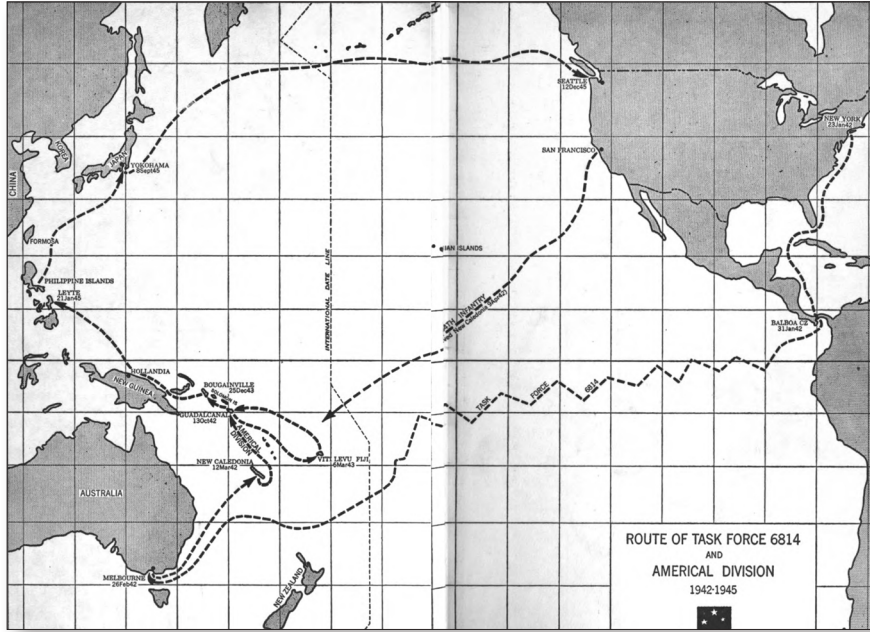
For the next forty days, their home was a converted cruise ship, newly designated as the United States Army Transport *Argentina*. Despite cramped and hot living conditions, heavily rationed drinking water, and two small meals per day, the band performed constantly for the 4,000 men and 50 nurses onboard. As the newly formed “Task Force 6814” passed through the Panama Canal and made its way across the Pacific, the band averaged at least two performances daily, including church services, informal jam sessions, and full band concerts—some to the sound of naval guns and concussion of exploding depth charges, as enemy submarines were an ever present threat.



Whiting conducts a concert aboard USAT Argentina. (Source: U.S. Army Signal Corps, courtesy of the Americal Division Association)

NEW CALEDONIA

Task Force 6814 becomes the *Americal Division*



The route of Task Force 6814, from Brooklyn, NY, through the Panama Canal, and across the Pacific. (Source: Cronin, Francis D. Under the Southern Cross)

After a brief stop in Australia, the troops of Task Force 6814 arrived at the island of New Caledonia. The band played for the troop debarkation, and for the seven-mile march inland—a strenuous task after forty days at sea.

New Caledonia, whose government had declared for the Free French in 1940, provided many opportunities for the band to perform in a diplomatic capacity. They played for a meeting of Division Commander Major General Alexander Patch and French authorities, for a Jeanne D'Arc Day celebration, and for the Commanding Officer of New Zealand forces. In addition, they continued to entertain American troops, including the 52nd Evacuation Hospital. As Whiting recalled in his log on 1 June 1942, "We have played many concerts and dances for the doctors, nurses, and patients there... From plastic surgery to the treatment of tropical diseases... they display a sympathetic understanding for all patients, whether they be high ranking officers or little native children. I cannot be too loud in my praise of this remarkable Staff and all the things they are doing for humanity."

Whiting and his band, which had been redesignated the 200th Field Artillery Band on 3 February 1942, lived some distance from the capital city of Noumea in handmade shelters made of bamboo and palm leaves, until Javanese natives helped them build wooden huts. The bandmen devoted much of their time to physical fitness when not performing, and also formed deep friendships with some of the natives and their families, who helped them procure fresh food to supplement their government issued rations.

On 27 May 1942, Task Force 6814 became the "Americal Division," an independent command under the War Department. Its name was derived from a contraction of the words "American" and "New Caledonia," and the unit insignia was 4 stars over a field of blue, representing the constellation the Southern Cross. On 11 August, Whiting's band was again redesignated, this time as the Americal Division Artillery Band.

(Left) Shoulder sleeve insignia of the Americal Division.

(Right) Troops of Task Force 6814 disembark at New Caledonia via nets. (Source: U.S. Army Signal Corps)



GUADALCANAL



"This was Christmas morning on Guadalcanal. With packing cases for his pulpit, Chaplain Abbe holds services for Protestant Soldiers in a coconut grove." (Source: The Chet and Helen Scrapbook)

"Ship up Band, Americal Division Artillery, on next available transport."

On 9 December 1942, Whiting received the order from Major General Patch, Division Commander. The band was aboard USAT *Heywood* en route to Guadalcanal, where the Marines had been embroiled in combat since August.

The bandsmen would need to adjust to a world of malaria, scorpions, crocodiles, sharks, earthquakes, and frequent artillery barrages and Japanese air raids – but first, they were determined to do what they could to support the battle effort. All musical activities ceased (with the exception of playing for the troops on Christmas), and they took on various duties in the areas of switchboard, plans, training, intelligence, kitchen, message center, wire division, and forward command post.

The Battle for Guadalcanal would end on 9 February 1943, but before that, on 23 January 1943, Warrant Officer Chester Whiting and his "Massachusetts Men" reached a milestone—one year of overseas service. In his log from that day, Whiting expressed his thoughts:

The phase through which we are living now is certainly the most trying period in our lives. We have been bombed by Japanese aircraft over 30 times since we have been here. We have spent hours and hours in dugouts during the night time without sleep. We are awakened many times each night by our big guns which are close enough to rock our bunks... Out of adversity and sacrifice come good things. Our band spirit has mounted to a new high. Each one of us has confidence in the other, each one of us is more tolerant, each one of us knows now the true values of friendship and comradeship... I still have the finest outfit in the Army, and for their devotion to duty, fine spirit and tolerance—I am humbly grateful.



American cemetery on Guadalcanal.
(Source: Naval History and Heritage Command)

VITI LEVU, FIJI

A Division Band is Formed



Entertaining the troops on Viti Levu. Chester Whiting conducts, and Frank Whiting is pictured far Right with cornet. (Source: The Chet and Helen Scrapbook)

The band arrived on Viti Levu, the principal island of Fiji, on 6 March 1943, aboard the Navy transport *American Legion*, according to Whiting's log. The climate and conditions allowed the band to get back to performing, which they did, frequently. As Whiting recounted on 1 May:

The Band has been making a terrific hit on this island...we have been putting on shows complete with script, little acts, and special arrangements. Bill Russell, George DeMattia, and Clayton Schmidt have been taking care of the musical arrangements and assisted by Clayton, I have a lot of fun writing the continuity for the shows. We follow the same pattern in each show, that is a radio broadcast from 'Station F.I.J.I.' ...The highlights of our show have been the outstanding work of Freddie and of Joe D'Agostino who does a character which I created for the first show, a take-off on Mrs. Uppington of the Fibber McGee broadcast—Miss Betsy Hoss...the audiences are most enthusiastic.

Sometime between August 1943 and January 1944, Whiting's Americal Division Artillery Band was combined with the 182nd Infantry Band, also from the Boston area, to form the Americal Division Band. There were some challenges as both units had bonds formed through adversity and had their own identities, but they did not take long to form a cohesive unit. As Whiting recalled in his log on 2 Jan 1944, "I have never seen a group of men possessing such a fine spirit and high morale as these boys from the 182nd." The new band performed three different times on Thanksgiving day 1943, and six different times on Christmas day, despite General Hodge, the Division Commander, telling them to take the day off.

Most Soldiers of the Americal Division had been exposed to malaria on Guadalcanal, and the Division's stay on Fiji brought a regimented pill-taking routine of as many as nine pills per day. On page 54 of *The Baton and the Pendulum*, Whiting describes the band's approach to this dilemma:

No intelligent Soldier will consume any more time than is necessary in accomplishing any assigned duty, and the taking of malaria medication was the most time consuming duty on Fiji. Pills were handed out in formation by the 1st Sgt. and swallowed in the presence of an Officer... I have no idea whose ingenuity was responsible for speeding up the procedure... but happen it did, suddenly and unrehearsed at a noon assembly. It started when the first man in line approached the 1st Sgt. with his hands behind his

(continued)

back and his mouth wide open. The 1st Sgt., Ted Henry, caught on immediately. From the palm of his left hand he extracted one Atebrin tablet, took careful aim, and tossed it into the man's open mouth... According to the clerk who checked the roster that noon, out of 216 pills thrown, only 13 missed the target... Within a few days, our pill-line was a thing of graceful symmetry...

BOUGAINVILLE

"Scorpions, Centipedes, Air Raids, and Music"



Chester Whiting and the Americal Division Band (Source: Whiting, We Went Overseas, Remember?)

Bougainville was rough, for the War was in evidence at all times. We had to first establish an area by cutting through a dense jungle, then dig fox-holes and later, deeper and more substantial dug-outs... Later, came tremendous artillery barrages...and severe earthquakes that made every coconut a potential weapon. And of course, the scourge of the jungle—malaria. I recall one of the many recurrences of malarial attacks when I lay for two days in my dug-out waiting for the fever to subside... But all these things belonged to Bougainville and there was no way to escape them, because we were at war.

-Chester Whiting, The Baton and the Pendulum

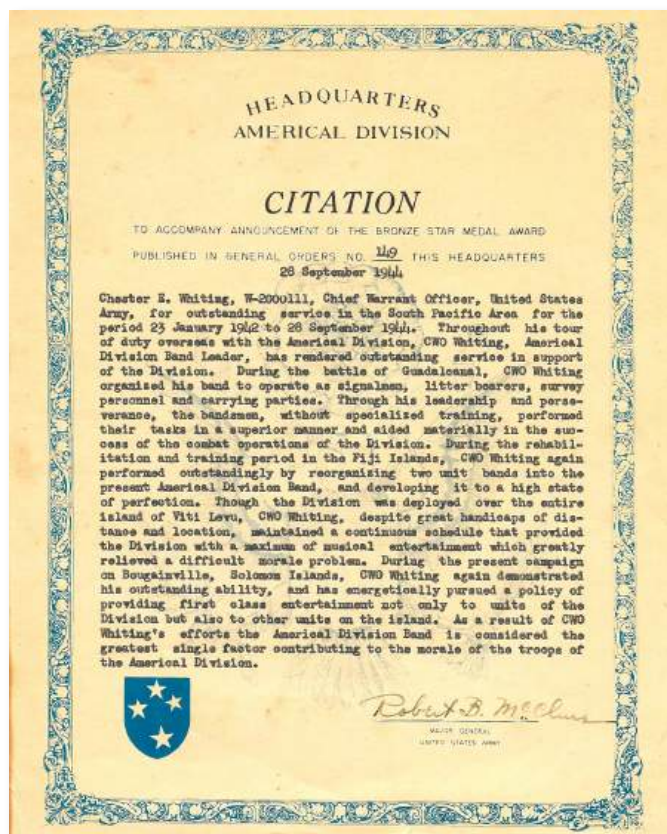
The band arrived on Bougainville on 10 January 1944. Despite difficult conditions and 46 enemy air raids, they were soon back to making music. Whiting penned four original marches: *Doughboy and Marine*, *Combat Quartermaster QMC*, *COL Landers*, and *The Americal Division*. Ray Arthur arranged tunes for their concerts. The band formed instrumental combos and a vocal quartet, dubbed "The Dugout Four." They performed for ceremonies, Easter services, and the entertainment of the troops. They even gained an announcer, Albin Beck, who had a background in radio. One of the band's most impactful missions was of their own invention. Band members devised a way to regularly work with the Chaplains to learn the birthday of a Soldier—usually a Private. They would then gather around his foxhole early on the morning of his birthday and play for him.

As rotations back to the United States were being discussed for those who had been in the Pacific for over two years, Whiting declined being put on the officer's list for earlier departure. He described in his log on 8 April 1944, "Major General John R. Hodge, the greatest leader in the Pacific, is loath to break up our band by sending home one or two men a month and has asked General Harmon to disregard the rotation policy in our case and return us to the States as a band. We are all walking on clouds and have our fingers crossed." In September 1944, after 34 months in the South Pacific, the message came through from General MacArthur: "Return Band, Americal Division by first available air transportation." The band was homeward bound, together (*The Baton and the Pendulum*, p. 59).

Before departing Bougainville for the United States, Whiting was presented the Bronze Star Medal by Major General McClure. The citation reads as follows:

Chester E. Whiting, W-2000111, Chief Warrant Officer, United States Army, for outstanding service in the South Pacific Area for the period 23 January 1942 to 28 September 1944. Throughout his tour of duty overseas with the Americal Division, CWO Whiting, Americal Division Band Leader, has rendered outstanding service in support of the Division. During the battle of Guadalcanal, CWO Whiting organized his band to operate as signalmen, litter bearers, survey personnel, and carrying parties. Through his leadership and perseverance, the bandsman, without specialized training, performed their tasks in a superior manner and aided materially in the success of the combat operations of the Division. During the rehabilitation and training period in the Fiji Islands, CWO Whiting again performed outstandingly by reorganizing two unit bands into the present Americal Division Band, and developing it to a high state of perfection. Though the Division was deployed over the entire island of Viti Levu, CWO Whiting, despite great handicaps of distance and location, maintained a continuous schedule that provided the Division with a maximum of musical entertainment which greatly relieved a difficult morale problem. During the present campaign on Bougainville, Solomon Islands, CWO Whiting again demonstrated his outstanding ability, and has energetically pursued a policy of providing first class entertainment not only to units of the Division but also to other units on the island. As a result of CWO Whiting's efforts the Americal Division Band is considered the greatest single factor contributing to the morale of the troops of the Americal Division.

-Robert B. McClure
Major General
United States Army



(Left) The Bronze Star citation from General McClure.
(Above) The band's many musical engagements on Bougainville included playing in front of the finance office for their friend Colonel Bunyon, as pictured above. 30 May 1944.
(Source: U.S. Army Signal Corps, courtesy of the National Archives Collection at College Park, MD)

BACK IN THE UNITED STATES

The Americal Division, along with the Americal Division Band and replacement personnel, would continue on to the Philippines, and eventually to Japan to take on occupation duties when the War ended. As for Chester Whiting and his Massachusetts bandmen—immediately upon arriving at Hamilton Field, California, Whiting was directed to report to Ft. Meade, Maryland to take command of a new unit called the 1st Combat Infantry Band, made up of highly qualified musicians who had served in all theatres of the War. He was permitted to bring ten men from the Americal Division Band, and chose his brother Frank Whiting, along with Ted Henry, Carl Wolfram, Clayton Schmidt, Pete Romanga, Jake Schrotman, Manny Medeiros, Armand Rapoza, Pasquale Caia, and Joe Foley. Later he was able to bring more on board, including Dominic Bonanno, John Nicol, Jimmy Paul, Jock Gilholm, Tommy Kenvin, Gilbey Potter, Joe Coke, Herbie Basford, and Bill Oxford (Whiting log, 13 July 1945). The men who had served together in the South Pacific would make up approximately one third of the new band.

The 1st Combat Infantry Band, as Whiting put it, was “rough, tough, and musically superior,” and did its job well from 1944 to 1946, touring the United States and selling war bonds. When the War ended, Whiting planned to go home to Massachusetts and resume teaching music, but General Jacob Devers, Commander of the Army Ground Forces, had other plans. Part Three of Whiting’s book *The Baton and the Pendulum* opens with the following quotation from General Devers: “I want you to organize a band that will carry into the Grass Roots of our Country the story of our magnificent Army, its glorious traditions and achievements; and of that great symbol of American Manhood—the Ground Soldier.” That band would be organized 21 March 1946 and designated as The Army Ground Forces Band. In 1950 it would be redesignated as The United States Army Field Band.

Several of the original Massachusetts men, including Frank Whiting and Ted Henry, would serve in the Ground Forces Band and The Army Field Band. Louis DiLavore, who served in the Americal Division Band on Fiji and Bougainville, joined The Army Field Band in 1952. Several from the 1st Combat Infantry Band also served in The Army Field Band, including Arthur Donofrio, who would become director of the Soldiers’ Chorus. The close bonds forged during the War, and the indomitable “band spirit” would be carried on and taught by example in the new organization. To those who moved on to civilian life or other assignments, Whiting had this to say in his final log on 23 July 1945:

I do want to offer a prophecy and a prayer as I bring this story of our war experiences to a close. My prophecy: that each and every one of you will be a success in whatever work you will engage—soldiering with you at Edwards, New Caledonia, Guadalcanal, Fiji, Bougainville, and back here make such a prediction easy. My prayer: that God will watch over you always and that the memories of those experiences through which we have lived will inspire you to tackle the biggest job ahead, the job of making America a finer place in which to live.



Twelve of the Massachusetts men who made up the 1st Combat Infantry Band. Front, L to R: Carl Wolfram, Joseph E. Foley, Peter Romanga, Pasquale Caia, Dominic Bonanno. Back, L to R: Manuel Medeiros, John Nicol, Edward B. Henry, Chester E. Whiting, Frank B. Whiting, Clayton E. Schmidt, Armand Rapoza. (Source: Whiting, *The Baton and the Pendulum*)

Two visual representations of the link between the Americal Division Band and The United States Army Field Band: (Top Left) Chief Warrant Officer Chester Whiting as Commander of the 1st Combat Infantry Band, with insignia of the Army Ground Forces on his left shoulder and the Americal Division on his right. (Top Right) Major Whiting as Commander of The United States Army Field Band in the 1950s, with the insignia of the Army Field Band on his left shoulder, and the Americal on his right. (Source: The Chet and Helen Scrapbook)



(Above) Taken in 1960, four members of The United States Army Field Band who served together in the Americal Division. (L to R) MAJ Chester E. Whiting, Master Sergeant Edward B. Henry Jr., Spec/7 Frank B. Whiting, Spec/6 Louis DiLavore. (Photo by Ted Moenig, Ft. Meade Photo Center. Courtesy of David Whiting)

Notes

Based on the writings of Chester E. Whiting:

The Baton and the Pendulum. Clearfield, PA: Kurtz Bros. Copyright 1963 by Chester Earl Whiting.

We Went Overseas, Remember? Whiting's logs from the South Pacific, recorded and compiled by T/Sgt Clayton E. Schmidt.

Special thanks to former unit historian SFC Richard W. Taylor, SGM (ret.) Michael Culbertson, SFC(p) Todd Sturniolo, Robert Sanner II – for presenting his father CW3 retired Robert Sanner's copy of *We Went Overseas, Remember?* to the archives of The United States Army Field Band, and to George and David Whiting and Susan Whiting Robinson for graciously allowing access to the photos in the *Chet and Helen Scrapbook*, housed at the University of Maryland Special Collections, Fine Arts Library.