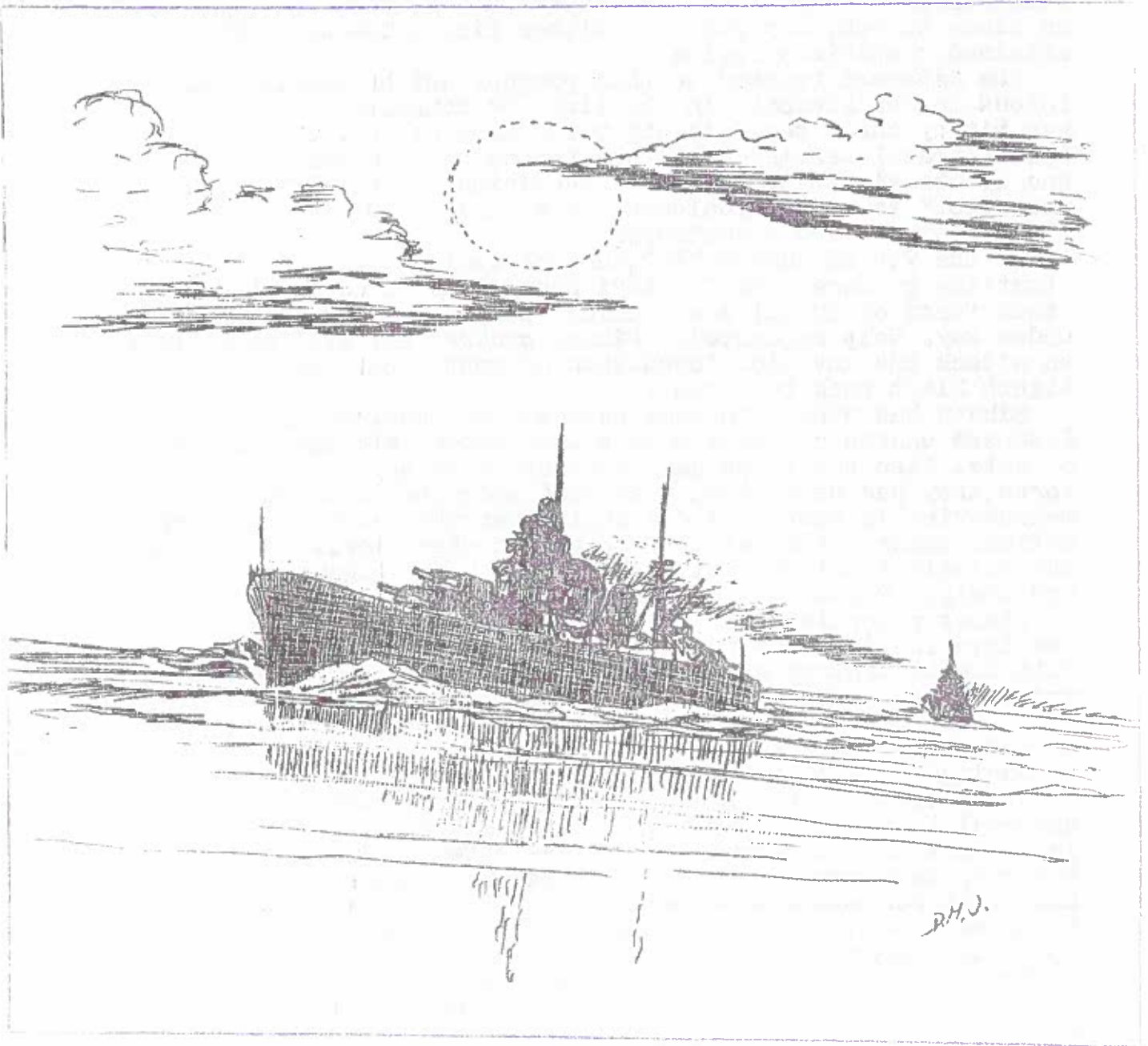


CMH NEWSLETTER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE COLORADO MILITARY HISTORIANS
VOLUME 1, NUMBER 11

AUGUST, 1967



A Lesson in Night Fighting

BY

Thomas Herman

On 7 August 1942 the United States First Marine Division landed on Guadalcanal, Tulagi and Florida islands in the Solomons. The outnumbered Japanese took to the jungles during the pre-invasion bombardment on Guadalcanal, while on Tulagi, where the Japanese had no place to run, they put up a bitter fight. The Americans had attained complete surprise.

The Japanese reacted to this pompous act by sending all available forces to Guadalcanal. In the first 24 hours, the invasion force was hit by three separate air raids from Rabaul. On the 8th a Special Naval Landing Force was forced to turn back after losing one of its six transports in a submarine attack. But roaring down the "Slot" towards Guadalcanal were five old heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and a destroyer.

On the 7th of August 1942, Admiral Gunichi Mikawa received a startling message: "0630 Tulagi Enemy task force sighted", "Enemy task force of 20 ships attacking Tulagi. Landing preparations under way. Help requested." Mikawa ordered all available planes to attack the invasion force, then he went about recalling the Eighth Fleet back to Rabaul.

Mikawa had other problems besides the American Invasion. The Japanese charts of these waters were incomplete and some were out of date. Also the ships had never operated together as a fighting force, they had never even practiced steaming in column. Night maneuvering in battle is difficult even when each commanding officer knows intimately the speed and characteristics of all the vessels involved. Yet each officer under Mikawa was a veteran and Admiral Mikawa was determined to strike.

Planes returning from the first attack reported the size of the invasion force as three cruisers and thirteen transports off Tulagi, many destroyers and twenty-seven transports off Guadalcanal and sixty to seventy planes over the ships. No carriers sighted. With the threat of carrier planes, the only time his force would be safe was at night.

During the 1930's the Japanese navy went about practicing night tactics. Their night practices had the savage wildness of the real thing. Ships were sunk in collisions, men were lost without qualm; nothing was spared to achieve utter realism in war games. The navy developed powerful night marine glasses and they combed the fleet for men with exceptional eyesight. These men trained in special techniques until they could distinguish targets at 8,000 meters—even on dark nights.

The most important of the devices used in the night battles were the search lights, which left the enemy naked to the gunners and the dreaded Long Lance torpedo. The torpedoes themselves were unsurpassed in any navy in the world. Since 1933 the Japanese had a completely oxygen-fueled torpedo that could travel at a speed

The Yunagi dropped out of formation, cut speed and turned back to keep an eye on the first destroyer. The rest of the formation increased speed to 30 knots and closed for the kill.

"Cruisers seven degrees port" a lookout cried. It was a good 18,000 yards away silhouetted by the red glow of a burning ship behind it. A parachute flare blossomed in the sky and suddenly Savo Sound was as bright as noon. There they lay--2 cruisers and a destroyer--at 8,000 yards. At 1:33 Mikawa gave the order--
"All ships attack."

With Chokai in the lead, the attack was on. The first victim was Canberra. The range was closing at the rate of half a mile per minute. The Chokai launched her terrible fish and the cruisers following her opened fire. By 1:46 Canberra, listing and ablaze, was finished. The Japanese now turned the fury of guns and torpedoes on Chicago. 60 seconds later she too was knocked out, her bow being blown off. Punch drunk she staggered erratically off into the blackness. She was harmless. Mikawa let her survive.

Yet there was still bigger game to be had. The sailors' bodies gleamed with sweat as they worked feverishly to reload the torpedo tubes. The Japanese force was roaring down on the second group of sleeping cruisers, appetites whetted and gun crews keen from action in the south. But the southern force didn't even warn the northern force that Japs were coming.

As Chicago wallowed ineptly toward Cape Esperance, Chokai, Aoba, Kako and Kinugasa, swung northeast. About the same time the last three cruisers in the column--Furutaka, Tenryu and Yubari--executed successive 90 degree turns to the left and formed column heading almost due north. They were now on a course roughly parallel to Mikawa's group, echeloned slightly to his left rear.

At 1:49 flares blossomed over the northern group--Astoria, Quincy and Vincennes. Remorseless searchlights picked them out and less than two minutes later the first 8 inch salvo splashed around them. Within six minutes Astoria was burning--hit by torpedoes. Japanese gunners pumped hundreds of rounds into the flaming ship. Mangled, the Astoria still fought, her last salvo smashed a turret on the Chokai.

About this time Aoba's searchlight beams fell on Quincy. Seconds later an 8 inch salvo blew one of her search planes off its catapult. Flames leaped. Quincy, now engulfed in fire, was deluged with shells from both sides--the American ships were between the two Japanese forces. Nevertheless her guns were manned and firing, but not for long. A Long Lance ploughed into the number 4 fireroom; a turret exploded, the bridge was wrecked and her captain killed. At 2:35 A.M. she capsized and sank.

Meanwhile Kako had illuminated Vincennes. The first Japanese salvo hit aft, where scout planes rested on catapults. Flames leaped into the air and shells and torpedoes found their targets. Vincennes took three or four torpedoes and was in her final agony at 2:15 when the Japanese ceased fire.

During the battle the chart room aboard Chokai was hit by an 8 inch shell and all the charts of the area were destroyed. With out charts of the area and still under the impression that Admiral Fletcher's carriers were still in the area, Mikawa decided to use the remaining three hours of darkness to retreat. It would have taken Mikawa too long to recollect his scattered force for a second attack. So he did the wisest thing to do--to retreat under the cover of darkness and save his valuable cruisers.

of 49 knots for a distance of nearly 22,000 meters-11 nautical miles. Using a contact detonator which seldom failed to explode the 1,210 pounds of explosive, it made a very dependable weapon. The Japanese, using unarmed torpedoes in their war games, had perfected the crews and the weapon had become a thing of terror. These ships' crews were well trained and they had been tempered to a fighting edge.

Mikawa's task force left Rabaul on the 7th of August. At 12:30 P.M. a B-17 sighted the force and reported it as six ships heading south. At 6:00 P.M. the task force was sighted by the U.S. sub, S-38, which reported the eight ships as two destroyers and three ships of type unknown. But the sub did give the correct course and speed of the warships.

At dawn on the 8th Admiral Mikawa ordered the cruisers to launch float planes. At 10:20 a Lockheed Hudson bomber sighted Mikawa's force but he didn't report the sighting until he returned to his base. At 11:00 a second Hudson sighted Mikawa but was driven off by gun fire. This pilot didn't even report the force.

At noon Mikawa's float planes returned and reported 4 cruisers, 7 destroyers and 15 transports off Guadalcanal and 2 cruisers, 12 destroyers and 3 transports off Tulagi. But the planes failed to locate any aircraft carriers.

Mikawa now had to make a decision. He had been sighted, he knew the enemy's force was stronger but was split and he knew that carriers were supporting the invasion but they hadn't been located. Knowing all these things he continued to advance onto Guadalcanal, planning to make his attack at night.

As the sun set, all combustibles, depth charges and loose gear were cleared from topside. Tension mounted in the ships. Some men wrote last letters home and others put the band of one thousand red stitches around their waists-supposedly a powerful talisman to ward off enemy bullets.

In high places in every ship, the finest eyes of the fleet peered into the night. Banners streamed from every bridge. Lookouts could identify every ship in the fleet, by silhouette and red or white rings on the funnels. At 11:13 P.M., August 8th Admiral Mikawa led off with a tactic that would stupify and confound the enemy. He launched three planes to lay course markers to guide the battle force in, to report the Allied dispositions and to illuminate the enemy when the signal was given.

Mikawa's force followed the marker lamps. Speed was increased to 26 knots at 11:35 P.M.. At 12:40 A.M. Savo Island loomed unmistakably 20 degrees on the port bow. Three minutes later an enemy ship was reported crossing the track ahead from right to left.

"Left rudder, slow to twenty-two knots." Mikawa ordered. Officers and sailors alike watched the American destroyer plod steadily ahead, directly into their course. One slight indication that the destroyer had sighted the force and fifty guns would have blasted it out of the water. All was quiet. Thirty seconds passed, then a minute. Then the destroyer, blind as a sleep walker, turned away a full 180 degrees and started back towards Guadalcanal.

Unbelievable! At the same moment a second destroyer was sighted, twenty degrees to port. This one was north showing her stern and steaming away-not in alarm either. "Right rudder. Steer course 150 degrees." Mikawa said calmly and automatically. The task force cleared between the destroyers and south of Savo as snug as a fox already in the henhouse.

BOOK REPORTS

* * * * *

SAMURAI by Saburo Sakai with Martin Caiden and Fred Saito

The U.S. should be very glad that there were not more Japanese pilots like Saburo Sakai. Credited with 62 kills by Aug. 10, 1942, his toll would have been much higher had he not been seriously wounded by TBF's over Guadalcanal. He had attacked them from underneath, believing them to be Wildcats. The 16 TBF's gave him quite a reception. He was hit in the head and only barely succeeded in guiding his battered plane back to Rabaul—a 650 mile trip. His story of survival is worth the reading of the book.

His career in the Navy started when he enlisted as a regular seaman. He continued to fight for advancement until he finally became an enlisted pilot. He fought in China for a time; then he participated in the invasion of the Phillipines where he was the first Japanese pilot to shoot down a B-17. He continued south until his unit reached the Java area. From there he was transferred to a unit which was forming in Rabaul. His former unit participated in the Battle of Midway which resulted in its annihilation at that battle. From Rabaul he was sent to Lae, a small airfield on the northern coast of New Guinea. It was here that he enjoyed the most success. His entire squadron did quite well in fact. It could boast at least 4 triple or more aces. In "The Ragged Rugged Warriors" Caiden substantiates some of the amazing stories which Sakai tells. After the Invasion of Guadalcanal, Sakai was sent back to Rabaul to fight over those skies. As related before, it is here that Sakai makes his greatest mistake which costs him one eye.

During his convalescence he was promoted to Warrant Officer. This status allowed him to see some of the top secret war reports. It was only now that he learned the truth about all the disasters which had overcome the Japanese forces. He served his country the rest of the war by testing new airplanes, training recruits and now and then trying to shoot down the formidable B-29. He survived the post war years and, at the writing of the book, was living fairly well.

Michael Kuhls

HISTORY OF MARINE CORPS AVIATION IN WWII by W. Sherrod

In December of 41 the Marine Air Corps wasn't much and what little there was of it was spread all over the Pacific Ocean. At Ewa field on Oahu they were smashed just like everyone else that fateful December morning. But at Wake Island they gave the U.S. something to cheer about. Shooting down Jap planes and sinking Jap ships was a novelty at this time in the war. At Midway, where the Navy won the day, they tried but failed. Some say that there would have been no victory had not the Marine pilots and Navy torpedo pilots sacrificed themselves to the Zeros, allowing McClusky's divebombers to attack unhindered. During the Guadalcanal operation the marine flyers came of age. There wasn't much organization at the Canal—flight leaders just grabbed what pilots he could find. Some of these pilots were stationed hundreds of miles away officially, but they were sent in to do what they could to help the situation. These were the men who drove the Emperor's Eagles from the air and his soldiers from the Solomons. These were also the men who were forced to "keep the Japs down" on those little bypassed islands. Their time was not spent idly. They developed bombing techniques and a close support system that would win commendations from every

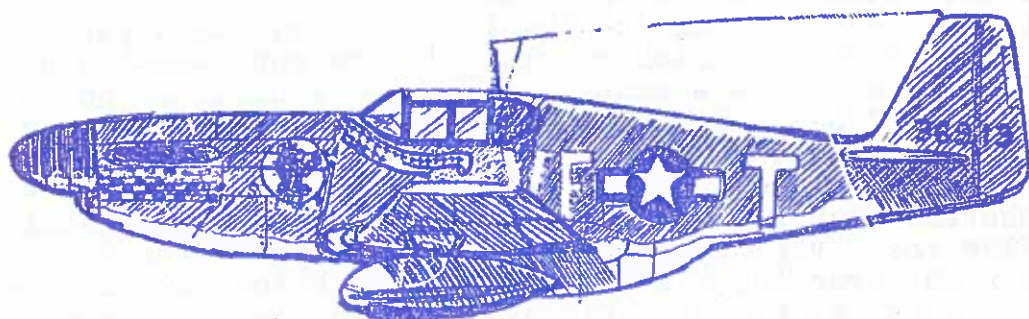
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division it was used with. In the Phillipines two MAG (Marine Air Groups) would act as flank guard and run interference for the 1st Cavalry's daring dash to the Santo Thomas prison in Manila.

Some Marine Groups were used on carriers. They didn't fare so well. Their operational losses were excessive. (They couldn't land that huge Corsair on a pitching deck) In the air, as usual, they easily held their own.

At Okinawa a Marine, Gen. Roy Geiger, was given command of the entire air operation. This amounted to over 40 squadrons. Eventually he was given command of the entire 10th Army and its supports.

During the war the marines reached a peak strength of over 10,000 pilots in about 150 squadrons. They didn't do it all but this book shows that they sure helped a helluva lot. Michael Kuhls

* * * * *

HISTORIAN'S SCUTTLEBUTT

Bob Jones will be remembered as one of the Six Old Guard. It was he who took the initiative to call an organizational meeting for September 1965 at the Super Chef. Even before that, thru his contact at work at KLZ-TV, he had featured several members in a 10 minute segment of an afternoon program. A subsequent article and picture concerning that was used in Table Top Talk for Sept. 1966. Our present meeting site was suggested by Bob and we began to meet at the Fort in December 1965. Two of our present members were introduced to the club by his direct contact: Dan Jones and Jim MacLachlin. Among his wide interests, he introduced Diplomacy and naval wargaming to our group. At present Bob is in Naval OCS at Newport, R.I. Recently he wrote that he has visited the R.I. Artillery Armoury. This is a must for any of us who might visit there. He has also made the acquaintance of Mrs. Anne Brown of Anatomy of Glory fame. Those of us familiar with this woman's vast collection of uniforms and prints and books certainly envy the invitation he received to visit her library "after hours".

"Remember the Auction" is the Historian's battle cry. Be sure to bring something to donate to this fund-raising. Also be sure to bring some of that "long green" money. You can't buy much without it.

Vacancies in the Executive Council will be filled at this meeting. There are three positions available: Historian and two Directors at large. If you are interested in one of these positions, spread the word at the dinner table and start your campaign there.

Meeting dates for the future:

Regular meetings: Oct. 2, Nov. 6, Dec. 4.

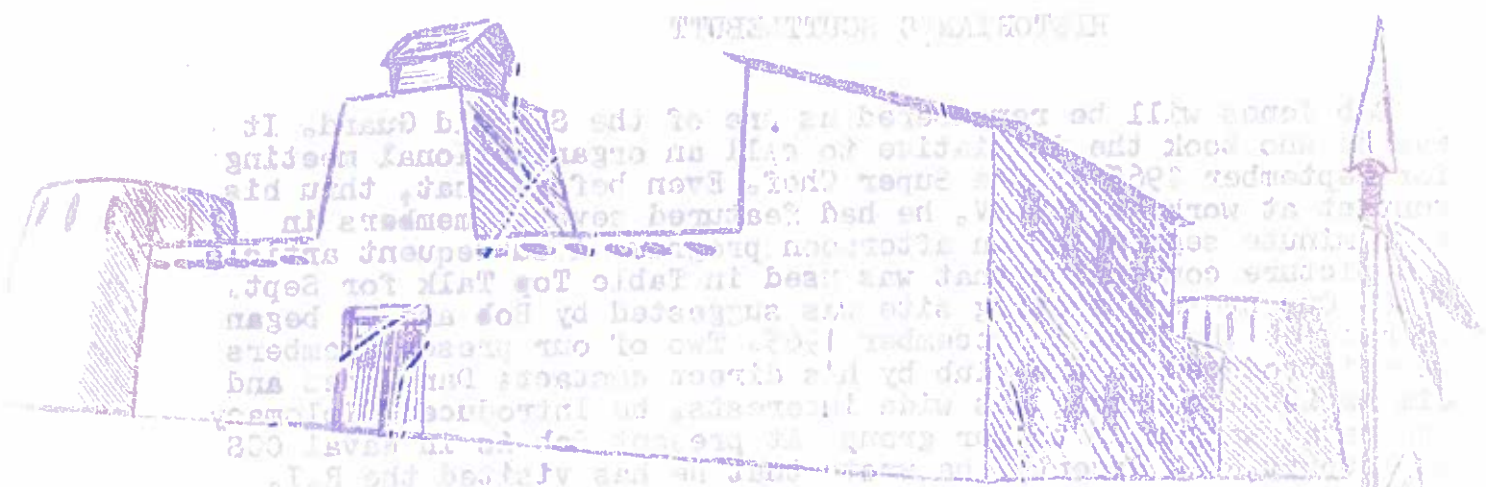
Executive Council: Wed. Sept. 27, Mon. Oct 30, Wed. Nov 29.

This meeting's program will be a survivor of Bataan.

General's corner-why not prepare for it ?

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Custer's Last Stand-The Indians' Version

In the April, 1966 (vol. XVII, No. 3, pp. 14 American Heritage) a Cheyenne historian, John Stands in Timber (whose grandfather was in the battle), presents a new explanation of what happened to Custer and why. The biggest mystery is just why Custer and all his men were completely wiped out. The normal pattern of Indian warfare on the great plains was to pin down an enemy force, make an occasional rush and gather enough brave deeds to brag about over the campfire. After this had been accomplished, and retreats of women and children covered, the Indians would break off and withdraw. It is John Stands in Timber's contention that a group of Sioux and Northern Cheyenne braves took a suicide vow. They would close with the troopers and start hand to hand fighting. This would tie up the white soldiers and allow the rest of the Indians to close in and finish the job.

In this version, this is what happened. Custer lead his troops along the ridge where the cemetery is now and down toward the river. Indian fire from the river bottom forced him back to the battlefield site. Custer then supposedly did a strange thing-he halted and waited for about 20 minutes. During that time many of the Sioux who had been engaging Reno broke off there and joined the Cheyenne who had surrounded Custer. The final Indians to join the fight were the suicide squads. They started the hand to hand fighting. Apparently the Indian strategy worked to perfection. The Indians, being better armed for hand to hand fighting, had the advantage and in about a half hour had wiped out Custer and his entire command.

To the last, Custer apparently made tactical errors. The Cheyenne felt that had he kept on retreating from the river bottom, he could have broken through and joined Reno. While no one knows for sure what really did happen in the battle, the Indian version would seem to be the most plausible.

submitted by Charles Williams

MORE SCUTTLEBUTT

At the last executive council meeting, Charles Williams was appointed Librarian by the Historian. Maybe this change will result in some action.

The new Constitution will be typed and distributed during the next month.

The distribution of the club pins will be subject to the following policy: All members of the club receive one free, any additional pins will be purchased from the club.

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