



SOUTH PACIFIC WWII  
MUSEUM

# *the* **SANTONIAN**

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## Welcome to the Santonian

The extra quarterly newsletter for our Museum members.

Welcome to the last issue of the Santonian in 2021. This is the newsletter to our special members and key supporters, where we unearth (hopefully) some new information from history.

The Santonian during the war was the name of the newspaper printed on the island to keep the thousands of personnel based on Espiritu Santo up to date with the goings-on that really mattered.

This month we've got a bit of home-grown sleuthing by Santonian editor Kevin McCarthy. It concerns a piece of wartime camera footage, the location of which is a bit of a mystery.

We also hear from a Ni-Vanuatu witness to the US presence – and how what happened came full circle for a happy conclusion years later.

Finally, how are your military semantics. We shed light on one of the great conflicts of (around) 1943.



The Second Channel in Espiritu Santo, looking south east. The channel is the site of a filmed mystery that we hope to unravel.

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# Somewhere (here) in the South Pacific

By Kevin McCarthy

Few places in the Pacific War have been as well documented in images as Vanuatu - or as it was then, the New Hebrides.

Anyone familiar with the museum's work will know we've accumulated many wonderful photos. The islands were home in fact to some of the finest still photographers to serve in the war.

Others, of course, record the famous visit of first lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

There may be more, but it's hard to be definitive in some cases as to whether the film is shot in the New Hebrides - because, of course, everything was known as "somewhere in the South Pacific".



The Second Channel in Lugnaville, Espiritu Santo looking south. In the foreground is the main wharf and in the background is Aore Island.

But when it comes to moving pictures, film, there is not much. Some newsreels give us an idea of how the Seabees worked on Espiritu Santo and show at least some of the realities of living there in the height of the rainy season.

This article however is about just one such mystery and the simple, but we trust effective detective work that turned up a great four-minute segment of film that includes very rare colour scenes of the US fleet in and around Espiritu Santo and in the Second Channel.

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The raw material in question is at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TK8bFGeejjo>

It's partly-informative title is Flight Deck Activities USS Saratoga (CV-3), 09/16/1943.

And the full notes at the US National Archives Naval Photographic Centre are:

Film #1307

1) SHS-Pan Deck, large number ships in harbor BG.2) MS-Pan Shore, huts, APs, DDs, & CLs anchored.3) LS-Pan Shore, LCs. SHS Men exit boat.4) SHS Man with binocs. BB blinks.5) MS-Pan DD, LC FG. Bow cuts water.6) MS Colors at mast, flight deck Saratoga.7) LS-Pan Shore. Two look-outs. 2 SBDs on deck.8) HS



A Douglas SBD Dauntless flies over the USS Saratoga (CV-3) on December 19, 1942.

Tractor pulls SBD-folded wings.9) SHS-Pan "Is." & deck Saratoga-2 SBDs.10) SHS F6F hoisted on "L" to deck, LS Target sleeve.11) LS-Pan Shore, huts & houses.12) SHS Flight deck & SBDs.13) LS B-24 in flight. LS BB, small ship FG."National Archives Identifier: 75940

None of which tells us where this was shot.

But a couple of things got us thinking.

First, the subject is the USS Saratoga, a famous aircraft carrier indeed and one which

spent a lot of time in Vanuatu waters.

The date is September 1943, a pivotal point of the war in the south Pacific (more on that later).



A TBF Avenger aircraft landing on USS Saratoga (CV-3) off the Solomons in 1942.

And the notes indicate many ships in a harbour setting. True, there are a few harbours in use at this time, but the most significant were at Efate and Espiritu Santo.

Now the next stage is to actually watch the video.

It opens with a pan, obviously from the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, across other ships in a harbour. There is what looks like a cruiser, destroyers, and lighter craft. It's a beautiful sunny day somewhere in the South Pacific.



One of the earlier shots in the video is a pan along the shoreline of a beach with some sort of buildings onshore.

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Then there is a long pan across a nearby island, with dark green low hills punctuated by sand beaches, and some indistinct buildings.

More ships are seen – a cluster of merchantmen, then what is probably a heavy cruiser, with a seaplane perched at this stern.

Then we see a zoom in on a considerable short structure before a beach. But it's not clear what it is. People are visible on the beach and a cutter is making its way. A closeup shot is then made of a landing craft that seems to be packed with personnel.



A landing craft loaded with US sailors makes its way across the Second Channel in the film.

After a pan to an officer on the flight deck with binoculars, the camera then captures a large warship signalling, and then the unmistakable profile of what were known as escort carriers, or more colloquially jeep carriers. Slow, converted merchant ships with a small complement of aircraft – definitely not a glamour ship of the fleet.

There's a shot of possibly the same or another aircraft carrier, shot from a different angle, and then a close up of the elegant lines of another merchant vessel, apparently. It's unusual for its superstructure, and clearly has caught the eye of the cameraman.

There's then a lengthy segment, which is

clearly no longer of the port scenes. Instead, it seems to be shots of the ocean passing beneath the bows of the ship.

Finally, that cuts to daylight, and a giant stars and stripes ensign flying from the mast of what we have to assume is the Saratoga.



Sailors stand on the edge of the flight deck of the USS Saratoga, anchored somewhere in the South Pacific.

Flight crews are gathering at one end of the deck, in the distance we can see a number of islands. One then comes into shot much closer, before a wider shot of a number of aircraft (Dauntlesses?) being prepared. Islands are still seen in the background, so clearly the Saratoga is not in open waters yet.



F6F Hellcats are towed across the flight deck of the USS Saratoga (CV-3) in preparation for launch.

There is then a very clear closeup of fighters, with wings folded, being towed into position on the flight deck. They're the latest US fighters,

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the F6F Hellcat, like larger versions of the earlier Wildcat. Shots continue of other deck operations.

There's the further pan of a nearby island, and then a great shot of the Saratoga heading up a channel, with a small craft heading towards it. The cinematographer then pans and follows a large aircraft as it flies alongside. It looks to be a Liberator bomber.

In the last five seconds, the Saratoga seems to be back in harbour, with other vessels in shot.



Towards the end of the film a small watercraft is seen making its way towards the USS Saratoga (CV-3).

So, a not very long bit of colour footage, interesting in its own right. But nothing in its archiving that tells us where it was shot. No-one online commenting on it seemed to know. So why not try and add to this bit of history by giving it a reference point.

When I first saw this, I had a hunch that it might well be Espiritu Santo, or Efate. So, to try and work through that hunch, we'd need a few tools.

These would be the visuals (what we can see on the footage), and the historical record (what's happening around the time).

The easiest of these was the visuals. Most obviously, the land that we can see. The sea, obviously, is less revealing, being consistently blue and deep.

But the landscape, especially somewhere like Vanuatu, is often unchanging, or to a large degree. Looking at somewhere like Aore island, opposite Espiritu and forming the

outer bulwark of the famous Second Channel anchorage, it is actually the case that it reached its peak of man-made development in the wartime – and since then, as any visitor to the island can soon see – the jungle and foliage has reclaimed a lot.

So, the first clue was to look at the island seen in the backdrop. Did it resemble that which you could see any fine day from Luganville? And the answer was yes.



The Second Channel in Luganville, Espiritu Santo looking across to Aore Island. The museum is located on the spit to the left of frame.

There were undulations and jungle outcrops where you would expect them to be in both the footage and real life.

And then there was the closing shot. It looks very much like the upper Seegond Channel, where it narrows, and you can view the bulk of Malo island, not too far in the distance.



The upper Seegond Channel looking down towards the seaplane base and Malo Island.

Not that I as a temporary visitor to Vanuatu should be seen as a reliable witness. So, I took my hunches to the project manager, Alma Wensi. Alma, who very sadly is no longer with us, took one look and said yes, that is Santo harbour.

Visually then, we were looking good. But what of the history around that time.

We are talking mid-September, 1943. It is a year since the US first counterattacked at Guadalcanal in the Solomons – essentially the reason that the New Hebrides is now such a massive and important base for the Pacific War. In the meantime, the flood of new ships entering US service is gathering, and about to begin operations – but that is in the central Pacific.

The US and Japanese navies had fought a series of battles over that year which had left both exhausted. Carriers had been sunk or crippled, and the Japanese in particular had lost irreplaceable experienced pilots.

From May, the US in the South Pacific was reduced to just one fleet carrier, the Saratoga, for a time supported by a British carrier.

So, the ship we see in the footage is a very precious asset indeed. It still has a job to do however, backing up the US forces working their way up the island chains of the Solomons towards the formidable base at Rabaul.

We know from the historical record that a start of August, the Saratoga took on a new air group, Carrier Air Group 12, and that it included new Hellcat fighters – the sort we see in the film footage. Furthermore, the Saratoga was based in both Havannah Harbour, Efate, and Espiritu Santo, through to November.

So that all looks promising. But the record doesn't tie down the Saratoga to being in the Seegond Channel, on or about September 16th.

Or did it? Another warship serving in these waters at this time was a light cruiser, the USS Denver. This Cleveland class cruiser had only been launched a year earlier. Now the reason to be interested in her is that there exists a meticulous transcript of the Denver's ship log.

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These logs record the daily actions of a vessel – where it is, where it goes, what it does. In the case of a light cruiser, it is very busy indeed.

What is really interesting about this log – is that it includes, when the Denver is in harbour, the details of what other ships are also in harbour.

The log can be read at Haze Gray and Underway, an excellent naval history website

ORTOLAN, BALSAM, SIOUX, S-38, DASH, RAIL, SOUTHERN SEAS; S.S. MATHEW LYON, W.S. RHEEM, MARK HOPKINS, MELVILLE STONE, CAP DE PALMES.

By midday that day, the USS Saratoga has – the Denver records – lifted anchor and departed the harbour. We can't ascertain why that was, as not all the fleet leaves, but it might be that an incident very early on the 15th had prompted her departure.

What happened is already recorded elsewhere, but as the notes, in the clipped style of a logbook:

0016 Shore batteries commenced firing at unidentified plane, bearing 0500 T, altitude 2200 feet. 0017 Search lights on shore turned on in vicinity of plane. 0018 Plane dropped yellow flare bearing 0350 T. 0018½ Plane dropped green cluster bearing 0090 T, altitude 2200 feet. 0022 Search lights turned off. 0039 Sounded "All Clear" signal. 0040 Secured from General Quarters.



USS Denver (CL-58) underway, circa December 1942.

<http://www.hazegray.org/navhist/denver/>

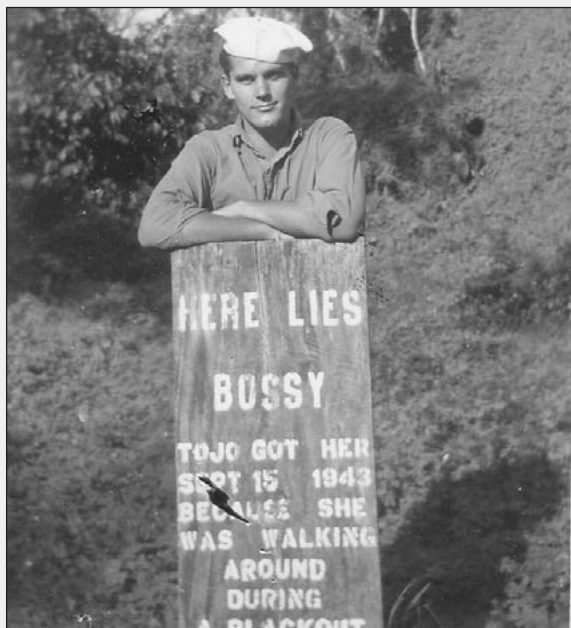
So, on September 15, the day before, here is the list of ships in the Second Channel – according to the Denver.

U.S.S. MONTPELIER, CLEVELAND, DENVER, SARATOGA, SAN JUAN, SAN DIEGO, BRETON, STERRETT, STACK, WILSON, WALLER, EATON, CONY, MC CALLA, RADFORD, FOOTE, LEVY, PRINCE WILLIAM, CONWAY, DIXIE, VESTAL, WHITNEY, PATUXENT, POCOMOKE, CHANDELEUR, WRIGHT, CASTOR, CHESTER SUN, ATASCOSA, MONOGAHELA, JAMESTOWN, COOS BAY, DELPHINIUS,



A Japanese H8K2 Emily Seaplane of the type that bombed Espiritu Santo six times throughout 1943.  
Illustration: warhistoryonline.com

This is actually the famous or infamous air raid by a long-range aircraft that led to the only recorded fatality on Espiritu Santo from enemy action – the death of Bossy the Cow. But as we recorded several years ago in our newsletter, the exemplary actions of radar watcher Joseph Kaminski meant there was ample warning for the fleet of the approach



The grave of Bossy the Cow. The only recorded casualty of the six air raids on Espiritu Santo by Japanese seaplanes.

of the Japanese aircraft. Note that if you see a picture of Bossy’s grave, it records her death as September 15th.

The Saratoga may well have been due to leave harbour later that day anyway. But it may also have been deemed prudent to put to sea – despite the ever present submarine threat – rather than risk some further action by the Japanese. One that, if fortunate, might have crippled the only US carrier in the South Pacific.

The Saratoga according to the Denver log is clearly back in harbour sometime during September 17, as the carrier is recorded as being in harbour during the log of the next day.

So, the log is pretty convincing in helping us answer the question of where this film is i.e., Espiritu Santo.

Taking that then, the log actually yields up more historical information. It gives a clue to the other ships we can see in the footage. There is clearly what looks like a “jeep” carrier. These were slow moving small carriers, capable of not much more than eighteen knots with a tailwind. They were used as aircraft ferries and were to also see combat during amphibious landings – but were not fit to join the big carriers like Saratoga in action.

The log confirms that there are two jeep carriers in harbour on the day it is filmed. These were the Prince William and the Breton.

There are also a string of light and heavy cruisers, though not battleships. That’s despite the original footage notation talking of a battleship (BB) winking i.e., telegraphing a message in the footage. The US heavy cruisers however were sizeable vessels and could be mistaken for something larger at first blush.

But as we mentioned earlier there was also merchant ship that caught the eye. Its lines are much more elegant than a typical cargo ship. And that would be the Cap De Palmes. With that sort of name for a flourish, it would not surprise you to learn that this was a French ship.



The Free French merchant ship the Cap De Palmes that was in port in Santo when the film was shot.

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In fact, this was the Free French navy effectively at the time. Her story is an intriguing one in its own right, but you'll have to wait for a future issue of the Santonian to see that. Needless to say, it was complicated!

There are other sources for the Saratoga being a frequent visitor to Espiritu Santo. In

in early November.

It was a tempting but risky target – Admiral Halsey however ordered a strike by the Saratoga and the light carrier Princeton. On November 5, more than forty bombers and torpedo bombers, plus fighters, hit the base. It was a stunning success, catching

the Japanese by surprise, badly damaging four heavy cruisers and two light cruisers, for the loss of only nine aircraft.

More operations followed in the Gilberts in November, before the Sara finally was ordered home in December, for a much needed refit.

Espiritu's famous flat top had finally earned her rest.



The view down to the Segonmd Channel from Bomber #3 Airfield. The Saratoga (CV-3), can be seen as the largest of the ships anchored in the channel, just to the left side of the main runway.

fact, the museum has a fantastic aerial image of the ship moored just off the end of the runway of Bomber Airfield 3, near Luganville. The latter airfield was completed in July 1943.

The footage we see of the Saratoga is also shot not long before perhaps the carrier's most celebrated actions of the war.

In October and into November, her aircraft had supported landings in the New Georgia islands, part of the string of islands between Guadalcanal and the formidable Japanese base at Rabaul.

The Japanese had responded by shifting a considerable force of heavy cruisers to Rabaul, something the Americans discovered

Have you any insights to add to this article? Maybe you have a photograph you'd like to share with the museum?

Please contact Kevin McCarthy at: [admin@southpacificwwiimuseum.com](mailto:admin@southpacificwwiimuseum.com) if you have something to share with us.

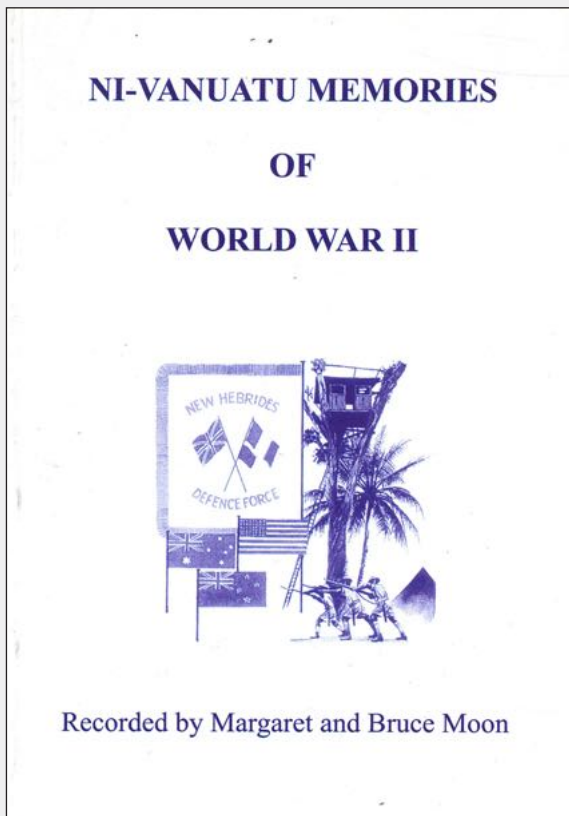


USS Saratoga (CV-3) underway in Puget Sound in September 1944, following her refit and new paint scheme.

# Ni-Vanuatu memories

In the 1990s, a New Zealand couple recorded memories of the war by talking to Ni-Vanuatu. It was an English predecessor of the remarkable Ni-Vanuatu language book Big Wok, which was published subsequently.

Margaret and Bruce Moon's "Ni-Vanuatu Memories of World War II" was published in 1994 and we'd like to preserve some of these



memories by including them from time to time in the Santonian.

If you wish to obtain a copy of this book, it is possible occasionally to find it online although its last edition was printed in 2003.

The following is an extract, of Dan Tanau Sope from Mele. It has quite a nice twist in the tale.

He talked in his taxi while driving between Vila and Onesua High School, on March 2nd, 1993:

"I was a boy and I remember the Americans coming.

We were in church one Sunday on Mele island also called hideaway island we did not know if they were Americans or Japanese.

They came ashore on the beach that is now the golf course.

I remember one morning when some planes were acrobatting. The engine of one went dead when the plane crashed into the water.

The pilot bailed out - we were curious and reached him in our canoes before the speedboats that came to the rescue.

The pilot was dead because his parachute had not opened.

There were three Americans coming to Mele island one night in a canoe - one was drowned the others landed. We think they were looking for girls.

They were found and were locked in the nakamal while the military police were sent for to take them to jail. The body of the third man was found the next day.

Around 1986 I was at the Radisson with my taxi - an American man was showing some

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photos to taxi drivers.

I went over and saw people whom I knew in the photos.

I took the American to meet one of the men in his photo and I drove him around for a week.

He told me of a plane that had crashed near the airport; he had been the pilot I took him



The local Ni-Vanuatu had some incredible stories they shared with the Moons, following their contact with US forces throughout the New Hebrides archipelago.

through the jungle to the wreck of the plane.

The man got into the plane and reached down and pulled out a bottle from where he had hidden it years before.

It contained a letter that was faded and spoiled, and he said it was related to a sweetheart whom he later married."



The US Navy employed Ni-Vanuatu to work with them in a range of jobs during World War II.

# Shell Shock

You probably don't instantly think of the other war that is waged in any sizeable military organization. The war for the language.

Espiritu Santo was no exception during World War II.

This extract from the report of Espiritu's Santo's lead surgeon, Arthur King, shows how one of the key semantic fights of the time played out. We are sure that King- noted for a sense of humour - wrote this tongue in cheek, but no doubt it was taken seriously by some then, and now. It concerns the improper use of the word shrapnel as meaning the same as shell fragments.



Lieutenant General Henry Shrapnel.

"Following a directive from USAFISPA (United States Forces in the South Pacific Area) care was taken that the term shrapnel was never used on any medical records on the island of Espiritu Santo.

The resistance on the part of medical officers to giving up the use of the erroneous

word for shell fragment was significant in demonstrating the persistence of traditions of the last war, lack of desire for precision, and the incompleteness of non-medical military education.

The directive was not enforced on most island bases and was followed on Espiritu Santo only after a supplementary explanation was circulated locally by the surgeon and clinical records were returned to the various hospitals for correction".

Now of course you know this, but shrapnel strictly is an exploding projectile filled with small lead balls. It was invented by Henry Shrapnel of the British Army who died in 1842 - but had fallen out of favour as a munitions type by World War II.

It is not the same as fragments from a shell.

Although as some casual googling will reveal, there is frustration aplenty out there that people still use the term shrapnel as a substitute.

Well, at least we know that for a few years in Espiritu Santo - at least on paper - the line was held.

## Tell us what you think!

Thank you for reading The Santonian. Your support for the Museum is most appreciated. If you any questions or suggestions for future topics, please contact Kevin McCarthy at: [admin@southpacificwwiimuseum.com](mailto:admin@southpacificwwiimuseum.com)

"Inspiring everyday heroes."



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