

## Coolidge 80th a spectacular success.

The preparations and lead up to the S.S. President Coolidge Commemoration and Exhibition were nothing short of extraordinary.

As the day got closer, the tension began to build with floods down at Bauerfield International Airport at Port Vila threatening the visit of so many people wishing to attend the event.

It felt like much of Luganville was behind the event in some way, with so many people offering to help, or donate raffle prizes for the official dinner. In fact, there was quite a wait list for tickets for the event that would conclude the day. But that was the least of our worries. It wasn't until early on the morning of the 26th, just a couple of hours



Penny Alexander, United States Peace Corps Director for Vanuatu, delivers her moving speech at the commemoration. Photo Niva Studios

before the commemoration was scheduled to begin, did we get the word that the charter flight carrying our VIP guests, was given the green light to leave Vila – the relief from everyone gathered at the commemoration site as we saw that charter literally fly over our heads, was indescribable.

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# The commemoration.

The ceremony was held at the Elwood J Euart Memorial, barely 100 metres from where the roughly 5,300 soldiers came ashore prior to the S.S. President Coolidge sinking on October 26, 1942.

It has always been held there as a mark of respect to Captain Euart and Fireman Robert Reid who lost their lives when the ship went down, that fateful morning. Captain Euart's passing was a remarkable one, given the incredible bravery he showed going back down into the sinking ship to rescue soldiers trapped in the lower spaces of the enormous cruise liner. Too weak to save his own life, Euart went down with the ship.



The flag raising party from Vanuatu's VMF raise the Vanuatu and American flags. Photo Niva Studios.



VIPs on the day were (from left to right), Penny Alexander, United States Peace Corps Director for Vanuatu; Chiba Hirohisa, Japanese Ambassador to Vanuatu; Heidi Bootle, Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu; Nicola Simmonds, New Zealand High Commissioner to Vanuatu and Mr Arthur Faerua, Director General of The Ministry of Justice and Community Services. Photo Niva Studios.



Wreaths laid at the Elwood J Euart memorial. Photo Niva Studios.

By around 9.00am, our VIPs had arrived. Mr Chiba Hirohisa, the Japanese Ambassador to Vanuatu; Ms Heidi Bootle, Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu; Nicola Simmonds, New Zealand High Commissioner to Vanuatu; Ms Penny Alexander, United States Peace Corps Director for Vanuatu and Mr Arthur Faerua, Director General of Justice and Community Services had managed to find a way out of Port Vila to be with us. We cannot thank them enough for the trouble they went to, to be a part of this special day. (continued...)

Following speeches and a wreath laying, everyone made their way to the beach where Santo legend and Coolidge caretaker Allan Power took divers out the meet 'the Lady' on board the sunken ship.

After a brief ceremony, the Coolidge's bridge bell was unveiled. The bell had been loaned to the museum by Janet Frouin and the Discombe family for the event. It actually 'resided' in Port Vila and was brought up by island ferry in a specially constructed crate, just in time for the event. The family had wanted to be a part of the day's events, given their long and close association with the Coolidge. However, the flooding in Port Vila had prevented them making the journey.



Penny Alexander, United States Peace Corps Director for Vanuatu, rings the bell in remembrance of the two lives lost on the Coolidge. Photo Niva Studios.



The dignitaries lay wreaths in the water where the Coolidge survivors came ashore. Photo Niva Studios.

Of course what we didn't know was the incredible surprise Janet had planned for the for the South Pacific WWII Museum - more on that later.

Following the unveiling, Penny Alexander stepped forward to ring the Coolidge's bell to commemorate the two lives lost when the ship sank – once for Captain Euart and once for Robert Reid.

After flowers and wreaths were laid on the water, the commemoration concluded. Everyone made their way from the beach and headed back to Luganville for the exhibition opening. (continued...)

# Exhibition opening.

The S.S. President Coolidge Exhibition was always going to be a very special event for the South Pacific WWII Museum. The first dedicated exhibition since the mini museum opened in 2017, it was going to take a lot of work to bring all the pieces together – and a considerable budget.



Museum Chairman Bradley Wood welcomes everyone to the opening. Photo Niva Studios.



The dignitaries at the event, cut the ribbon to open the S.S. President Coolidge Exhibition. Photo Niva Studios.



With the exhibition open, the crowds poured in. Photo Niva Studios.

Thankfully for the Museum, things fell wonderfully into place with the generous sponsorship of the exhibition by the Vanuatu Tourism Office (VTO). Adela Issachar, VTO's CEO confirmed their support, designed to bring history and tourism in Sanma Province, closer together.

The vision behind the exhibit was not only to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the sinking, but demonstrate to the world that a little museum in the middle of the South Pacific could put on an event equal to an exhibition anywhere in the world. A big ask, but we feel we have gone a long way to achieving just that.

At 10.30, with everyone gathered under the big Santo Hardware marquee, the opening began with speeches from Penny Alexander, Museum Chairman Bradley Wood and Project Manager Jimmy Carter.

A cutting of the ribbon by the five VIPs and Bradley Wood officially opened the exhibition – but there was one last thing left to do. (continued...)

After months of cleaning, restoring, milling, shaping, cutting and a lot of testing, the Coolidge's port whistle was ready to sing for the first time in 80 years – and sing she did.

With two large compressors putting out around 100 psi of air pressure each, combined into a single four-inch pipe - and a squirt of high-pressure water injected into the airflow - the whistle came to life, much to the delight of everyone there. In fact, it brought a lot more people out from all over town to Unity Park to see what was going on.



The museum was decked out with a real celebratory feel thanks to Museum Admin Officer Marina Moli. Photo Niva Studios.

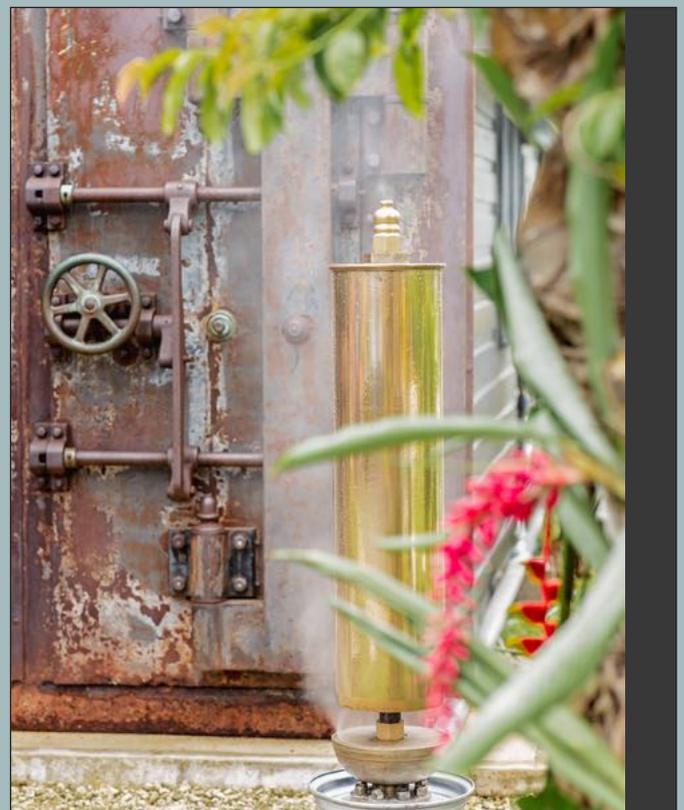


Crowds of onlookers came to hear the Coolidge whistle. Photo Niva Studios.

The sound from Coolidge's whistle was so loud it was heard almost 2km away and the locals there thought a cruise ship was coming into Luganville harbour.

With the whistle sounded, the doors were opened, and our VIPs made their way inside to see the amazing Allan Power collection, on display for the first time.

The exhibition would never have been possible without the generous donation made by Allan Power's estate, his family and business partner Tony Lewis. Allan always said that following his passing, he'd like to see the collection passed onto the museum. Sure enough, Allan's wishes were honoured, and we hope we've done them justice, through our exhibition. (continued...)



The Coolidge's whistle comes to life for the first time in 80 years. Photo Niva Studios.

# Million Dollar Point.

Later that afternoon, VTO hosted free snorkelling tours to Million Dollar Point for anyone interested in seeing Santo's underwater history up close. Hosted by Wrecks to Rainforests' Mayumi Green - who is also an experienced Coolidge diver herself - minibuses took guests from Luganville up to Million Dollar Point, where they gained a whole new insight into what had been dumped there at the conclusion of World War II.



Snorkellers get ready to explore Million Dollar Point. Photo Niva Studios.

## The hottest ticket in town

To wrap up what was an exhausting day for everyone associated with the day's events, Lisa Dinh and her mother Mary Jane Dinh, put on a big fundraising dinner for anyone who wanted to attend.

Held in the Hotel Santo's new nakamal that was completed less than 24 hours prior to the event, around 70 people were treated to a wonderful buffet themed around the favourite dishes of Allan Power – after all it was his home away from home, just across the road from the Allan Power Dive Tours' headquarters.

It was a great night with speeches from Bradley Wood and Jimmy Carter and videos specially cut for the night to commemorate the Coolidge's anniversary.

With a raffle and some new members joining the museum, around 150,000 vt was raised for the Museum, plus we managed to secure a new Navara sponsor as well. (continued...)



Revellers enjoy a wonderful night at the Hotel Santo. Photo Niva Studios.



Bradley Wood welcomes guests to the dinner. Photo Niva Studios.



# Thank you

What a day it was. And we couldn't have done it without the assistance of the following people:

**Mr Chiba Hirohisa,**

Japanese Ambassador to Vanuatu

**Ms Heidi Bootle**

Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu

**Ms Nicola Simmonds**

New Zealand High Commissioner to Vanuatu

**Ms Penny Alexander**

United States Peace Corps Director for Vanuatu

**Mr Arthur Faerua**

Director General of The Ministry of Justice and Community Services

**Adela Issachar** - CEO, Vanuatu Tourism Office

**Lea Faccarello** - Manager, Long Haul Markets, Vanuatu Tourism Office

**Paul Pio** - Manager, Short Haul Markets, Vanuatu Tourism Office

**Melissa Groundlin** - Visitor Information Officer, Vanuatu Tourism Office

**Serah Ety** - VTO Espiritu Santo Travel Centre, Vanuatu Tourism Office

**Kersom Richard** - Graphic & Creative Officer, Vanuatu Tourism Office

**Greg Wilson** - Chief Commercial Officer Air Vanuatu

**Jennifer Watson** - Marketing & Communications, Commercial Department Air Vanuatu

**Millie Ogden** and the satellite techs at 3Link Communications

**Janet Frouin**

**Christele Frouin**

**Discombe Family**

**Tony Lewis**

**The Estate of the late Allan Power**

**Captain Jara Simon** and the flag bearers from the VMF

**Yelena Isaak** - Niva Studios Photography

**Rosemary and Richard Lo**

**The boys at Santo Hardware** - you're the best!

**Lisa and Mary-Jane Dinh** and the staff at Hotel Santo

**Tara Toone** and the staff at The Espiritu

**Rick Wood** and the staff at Farmland

**Jayden Wood**

**Rommel Tugalon**

**Yves Lau**

**Mr and Mrs Lau** and LCY Garage

**Paul White** and **Lyndell Fourro** from Aore Adventure Sports & Lodge

**Lisa and Brad Gray** from Aore Island Resort

**Esline Turner** from Santo Seaside Villas

**Steve and Wendy Turner**

And everyone else who worked so hard behind the scenes to help make October 26 2022 such a wonderful and memorable success.



All photos thanks to Yelena Isaak - Niva Studios, Luganville.

# The Coolidge bell comes home.

The S.S. President Coolidge exhibition opening saw the Coolidge bell go on display for the first time since it hung proudly on the bridge of the ship in 1942. In fact it hadn't been in Espiritu Santo since the early 1950s.

It was very generously loaned to us by Janet Frouin and the Discombe family, following its recovery by Janet's father, Reece Discombe not long after the war.

Reece was a legend in the dive community of Espiritu Santo - and not just because of his recovery of the bell. His story is a remarkable one, being one of the first people in the world to use the Aqua-Lung, only recently invented by French Oceanographer Jacques



Reece Discombe and his precious Coolidge Bell. One wonders how he raised it, given its incredible weight.

Cousteau and engineer Émile Gagnan. Using the newly invented equipment, Reece discovered the missing French ships Astrolabe and La Boussole, the latter of which had not been seen since it went down in 1788. For his achievements, President Charles de Gaulle flew to the New Hebrides to personally award Reece the French Legion of Honour.



The beautiful big brass Coolidge bell. So lovingly looked after by the Discombe family for the last 70 years. Photo Niva Studios.

We will be doing an in depth story on Reece Discombe in a later edition of our newsletter.

As we mentioned previously, Janet Frouin (Discombe) and her daughter Christele, were unable to make it to Santo on October 26, due to the flooding at Bauerfield International Airport in Port Vila. However, they finally made it to the Museum in Luganville a few days later on Saturday morning.

Chairman Bradley Wood and Museum Admin Officer Marina Moli were there to meet our VIP guests to take them on a special tour of the exhibition. (continued...)



Christele Frouin (L) and her mother Janet Frouin (R) at the handover of the Coolidge bell at the South Pacific WWII Museum.

What happened next came out of the blue, and left Brad and Marina, literally in tears.

Janet announced that the family had decided to donate the bell to the Museum.

As Bradley later commented, "we always dreamed that one day the Coolidge's bell might go on a more permanent display in the Museum, but we were not expecting this - I was speechless."



A very happy and proud Museum Chairman Bradley Wood, accepts the bell from Janet Frouin.

Janet explained that the family felt the bell's home should be in Santo and what better place to for it to reside, than at the South Pacific WWII Museum.

How do you properly thank someone for such generosity? It's difficult to put into words.

The significance of the bell - of any ship's bell - cannot be underestimated. And to have this one, really has made all the hard work that went into the exhibition, all the more worthwhile.



Janet Frouin donates other pieces to go along with the bell.

Thank you Janet, Christele and the entire Discombe family for entrusting the bell into our care. It will always take pride of place in this museum and we can't wait to have it on show in our new museum, in the not too distant future.



One final kiss and Christele and Janet say goodbye to their beloved bell.

# A Rough Raider for the Museum

Not every bit of news this month is centred around the S.S. President Coolidge.

We had a fabulous collection of World War II personal items, memorabilia and keepsakes arrive from Mark Johnson in the United States.

His uncle, Cecil (Cec) George Johnson was a bombardier aboard a B-25 Mitchell bomber in New Guinea. Mark wanted his uncle's wartime treasures and memories to go somewhere where they would be cared for and eventually put on show for future generations to appreciate and of course where his uncle's legacy would live on.



Lt. Cecil G. Johnson in his officer's uniform.  
Photo Mark Johnson.

Mark enclosed short bio on Cec, so we'll let him take up a condensed version of his uncle's story.

'My Uncle Cec was born Cecil George Johnson in the town of Whitman, Nebraska on April 7th, 1920. He graduated from Webster High School (Webster, WI) in 1937. In March of 1942, he joined the Army Air Force as an Aviation Cadet and on May 8th, 1943, Second Lieutenant Cecil Johnson, graduated from the West Coast Training Center Advanced Bombardier School at Kirkland Field, Albuquerque, New Mexico.



Cec sitting outside his tent during his training in June 1942.  
Photo Mark Johnson.

In a letter he wrote to his mom, dad, sister Wilda and my father Merlin (Cec always called my dad by his middle name because when he was born he wanted grandma and grandpa to name him Merlin; they compromised and named him Louis Merlin Johnson) he wrote:

*"Sunday is Mother's Day and I'm sending mom the wings I got at graduation. It's bad luck for us to wear them, but good luck for you to wear them for us, so we buy the ones we wear. By the way, I'd send Merlin a pair, but men aren't allowed to wear them as a civilian."*

After bombardier school he then spent six weeks at Carlsbad for dead reckoning navigation training where he graduated on June 26th 1943. (continued...)



Cec's bombardier class at Santa Ana California, December 1942.  
Photo Mark Johnson.

In March of 1944, he began his combat service with the 500th Bombardment Squadron known as the "Rough Raiders" in New Guinea.

Over the next nine months he would fly 51 missions, 48 of which were in combat as the Navigator/Bombardier with his crew on a B-25 Mitchell they named "Pannell Job". He was promoted to 1st Lieutenant on August 12, 1944 and at the end of October was appointed as Squadron Intelligence Officer.



A photo taken from Cec's B-25 low over an unknown Pacific village. Photo Mark Johnson.

In December of 1944, Uncle Cec was sent stateside for rest and recuperation; all totalled, he had logged 308 hours of flying in his missions. He had been awarded the Air Force Medal and an Oak Leaf Cluster in lieu of a second Air Force Medal.

Upon returning stateside he served as a flight instructor for a period of time before being commissioned as a 1st Lieutenant in the Reserve of the Air Force. He was finally honourably discharged from the Reserve Air Force in 1958.



One of the many B-25 bombers in Cec Johnson's squadron. Photo Mark Johnson

Apart from an incredible collection of photographs, documents, personal records and other items, we were also sent a Japanese Samurai Sword and a Japanese flag. They too come with story from Cec, via Mark.



The Samurai sword Cec 'inherited'.



The Japanese flag now in the Museum's collection.

'One day a buddy of his from the squadron came running up to Uncle Cec and asked him if he could loan him a bottle of gin. When Uncle Cec asked why, the buddy responded that he wanted it to trade it for a Japanese Samurai sword, Japanese surrender flag and a whiskey or tea cup set. Uncle Cec loaned him the bottle. A week or so later his buddy was killed while on a mission and so when the squadron personnel were cleaning out his personal stuff, they found an IOU note that said "I owe Cec Johnson a bottle of gin, which he loaned me so I could barter for this Japanese Samurai sword, Japanese flag and whiskey cups." The squadron personnel then handed over those items to Cec, which based on the IOU note they reasoned now belonged to him.'

Cec's collection is currently in Australia with Museum Project Manager James Carter, as shipping directly to Vanuatu is still not advisable, due to the lack of flights going there. It will make its way to its new home upon James' return sometime in the new year.

We thank Mark most sincerely for entrusting his Uncle Cec's collection to us.

# Inspiring everyday heroes

Our Inspiring Everyday Hero this month, is a somewhat controversial choice, but one who without his determined and some would say heroic actions, the death toll from the sinking of the S.S. President Coolidge may have been far greater.

Captain Henry Nelson was commanding the Coolidge that fateful morning in 1942, when the ship hit two sea mines in the Second Channel.

Following the explosions, it was he and he alone that ordered the ship to be driven at speed towards the beach, to give the roughly 5,300 troops on board every opportunity to make it ashore to safety.



Captain Henry Nelson on the bridge of the Coolidge.

Of course it remained to be seen where fault would lie. Was it Captain Henry's fault? Was it the fault of the Noumea Port Director who may not have issued



Abandon ship! Soldiers make their way ashore to Espiritu Santo.

the correct instructions for entering port? Did Nelson ignore the instructions? Was there some other reason?

Following a hastily convened inquiry by the US Navy, Nelson was acquitted of all charges brought against him by Admiral Halsey and the US Navy. An inquiry later in San Francisco, also found he had nothing to answer for.

So who's fault was it? That we will never know. But thankfully Captain Nelson did what he thought was right and saved the lives of the thousands of men and women on board the Coolidge that morning in October 1942.

**Inspiring Everyday Heroes is our Museum brand and means how the stories of yesteryear and our project can inspire today's new generation.**



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