

High water mark.

You may remember back in September last year, Millie Ogden, CEO of 3 Link Communications in Port Vila came on board for the Coolidge commemoration and exhibition.

One of the things she did for us was contact the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation in the USA to let them know of our plans and potentially attend the commemoration in October.

While a representative from the foundation was unable to make it in person to the event, their President, Matthew Denhart arranged to have an antique Moxie bottle filled with water drawn from a tap at the historic Coolidge



The bottle now on display in the Museum.

homestead in Plymouth Notch, Vermont.

That water came from the same spring as the water in the bottle used to christen the Coolidge in 1931.

Moxie was the President's favourite soft drink, and the bottle was actually found at the Coolidge homestead and in all likelihood belonged to the President.

The bottle and a lovely letter were packaged up and sent to the Museum. The thought was that it would arrive in time for our commemoration.

(continued...)

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Well that was the last we heard of it... until early February this year.

Following persistent contact with Vanuatu Post, the registered package containing the bottle could not be located. It appeared to have landed in Vanuatu, but where it went next remained a mystery. And what condition might it be in? Did the seal hold? Would the water still be in the bottle?

However, some persistent pressure from 'Detective Marina' paid off. Following we don't know how many searches of storage areas at the post office, the package was found in Luganville! Last we knew, it was still in Port Vila.



The bottle of spring water just prior to being packaged up at the Coolidge Homestead in Vermont.

The bottle was rushed back to the museum and unpacked from its box. To Marina and Chairman Bradley Wood's delight, it was in the same shape as it was when it left the USA almost five months prior - and not a drop of water was lost.

The bottle is now on display near the Coolidge bell and is another wonderfully fascinating addition to the Museum's S.S. President Coolidge collection.

Tankyu Tumas VSA and Miranda

Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) New Zealand has had a long association with the South Pacific WWII Museum. Over the years we've been very lucky to have had the support of many everyday New Zealanders who have volunteered their expertise to the museum at no cost to us.

In fact, the Everyday Heroes articles and Month in Military History stories you find in our newsletters are still written by Kevin McCarthy, years after he finished up his service with us and VSA. Additionally, Kevin somehow finds the time to write our members' magazine *The Santonian* that comes out quarterly.

So it was with great excitement that we welcomed our newest volunteer to Luganville last week, Miranda Williamson.

A graduate of Victoria University of Wellington with a Masters' Degree in Museum and Heritage Studies, Miranda is a woman of many talents.



Museum Chairman Bradley Wood meets (From L to R) VSA Deputy Chief Executive Officer Michelle Evans, VSA volunteer Charlotte, South Pacific WWII Museum volunteer Miranda Williamson and VSA Programme Manager for Vanuatu Mary O'Reilly.

She is an historian with extensive research experience at archives and libraries throughout New Zealand. Miranda has been a Research Assistant at Te Papa Museum, a Heritage Consultant and is currently a Research Assessment Advisor at Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga. She has also been a Refugee Resettlement Support Worker with the Red Cross. And to top it all off she is conversational in Mandarin, Māori and Spanish.

That's just the tip of her CV iceberg and we could probably fill pages with her other achievements.



Museum Chairman Bradley Wood explains some of the items in our Coolidge Exhibition to TBA on the left and Miranda in the blue dress on the right.

But for now, we'd like to take this opportunity to welcome Miranda to Vanuatu and the South Pacific WWII Museum and thank her for becoming a part of our extended family on Santo.

Kit up.

Models are a great way of bringing stories and events to life, that might otherwise just be told through text and photographs. At least that's the excuse Museum Project Manager James Carter uses to justify the dozen or so models he has created for the museum.



An earlier model of a Catalina at the Seaplane Base on Santo under construction. The resin pour of the water is about to take place.

The latest two to join the collection are aircraft from the USAAF and Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN).

The USAAF bomber is based on the famous B-25 known as 'Pannell Job'. This aircraft operated out of several airfields in New Guinea for much of its life in the Pacific War.



B-25 'Pannell Job' is close to completion. A few minor details to complete.

Why Pannell Job is significant to us is that Mark Johnson, the nephew of 'Cec' Johnson - one of the aircraft's crew - has donated his uncle's personal affects to the Museum - these included his flight log, a Japanese sword, flag and many fabulous photos, that will go on display at a future date. The model - with working landing lights - will be included with Mark's beautiful collection.

The second model is a Japanese Kawanishi H8K2 flying boat. The four-engine aircraft was designed for long range and extended endurance on patrols or bombing missions typically flown alone over the ocean.

Six of those long-range bombing missions were to Espiritu Santo during 1943. Damage was minimal and



The Japanese H8K2 is also near completion. Antennas will finish it off.

there were no casualties - except for Bossie the Cow, who shouldn't have been our grazing during an air raid.

The model depicts the huge flying boat taking off from the Shortland islands on its way to Santo, fully armed with aerial bombs under each wing. Given the attacks took place at night, no photography exists of the raids. There is a chance some shots of the aftermath may exist in the US Archives. But until they can be found, the model will serve as the only visual aid to the story of the bombing of Santo.

Adventure in paradise.

P&O Pacific Adventure visited Luganville on February 24. It was a mammoth day for Marina and the crew at the Museum with 195 cruise ship passengers and 30 locals coming to visit us in the space of just a few hours

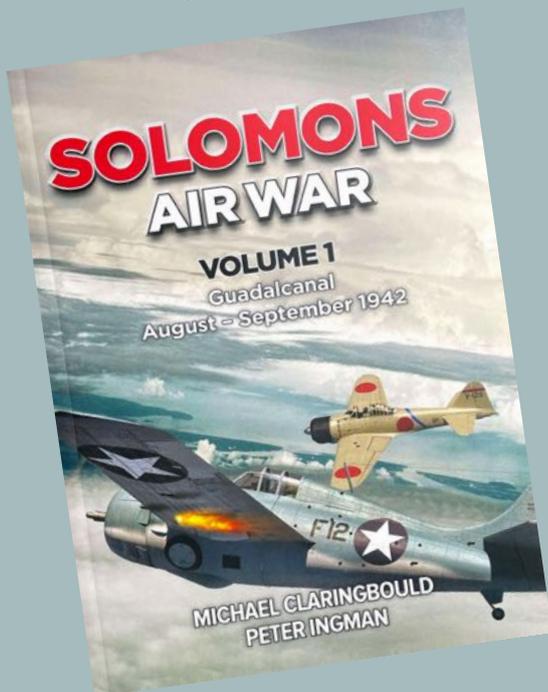
A big thank you to Museum Chairman Bradley Wood, Bill, our new VSA colleague Miranda, Jocelyn and the guys from Santo Hardware and Farmland who helped put out signs at the wharf telling people how to find us. Plus of course an even bigger thank you to our rockstar Museum host Marina who never fails to greet everyone with a big Vanuatu smile.

Once again, we're the number 1 tourist attraction in Luganville! Not bad for our little museum!



Must have reading.

If you're an avid history buff, or just have a passing interest in the Guadalcanal campaign of the Pacific War - particularly from an aviation point of view - we can highly recommend the latest book from Avonmore Books entitled *Solomons Air War Volume 1 - Guadalcanal August-September 1942*.



Michael Claringbould and Peter Ingman's book is a must for anyone with an interest in the Solomons and Guadalcanal.

This impeccably researched and beautifully illustrated book by Peter Ingman and Michael Claringbould, was sent to the Museum to add to our growing library of reference books.



The book is richly supported with beautiful images like this SBD.

Why we love this book is that it deep-dives into details of the incredible air war at the opening of the Solomons Campaign like never before.

What readers will certainly appreciate is the depth of research and storytelling from both sides - US and Japanese. Not only is every US aircraft lost in the campaign listed, but so is every Japanese aircraft. In fact, over 30 Japanese sources were consulted in the compiling of accurate data and factual information, along with dozens and dozens of sources in Australia, USA and elsewhere.



Another of Michael's beautiful illustrations, combining real photographic backgrounds with computer generated aircraft imagery.

If you want to learn all there is to know about the Solomons air war, then this is definitely the book for you. It's available directly from the publisher at <https://avonmorebooks.com.au>

Thank you to Peter Ingman for donating a copy of his book to the Museum.

Lost and found

Back in the August 2021 edition of the Museum newsletter, we brought you the story of the ABSD-1. The enormous floating dry dock that arrived in Santo in July and October 1943.

We have some new news regarding the fate of ABSD-1. But first, a condensed version of its life in the South Pacific, taken from the original article.

With Espiritu Santo established as the largest naval base in the South Pacific, its role as a giant Pacific Theatre maintenance and repair workshop saw it repair everything from the smallest tenders to the largest battleships. While the majority of repairs were undertaken while the ships were tied up in port, major repairs, maintenance and refits could only be done when ships were out of the water - in dry dock.

Transiting back to Hawaii or the United States was impractical, hazardous and quite simply out of the question during wartime. And if emergency repairs

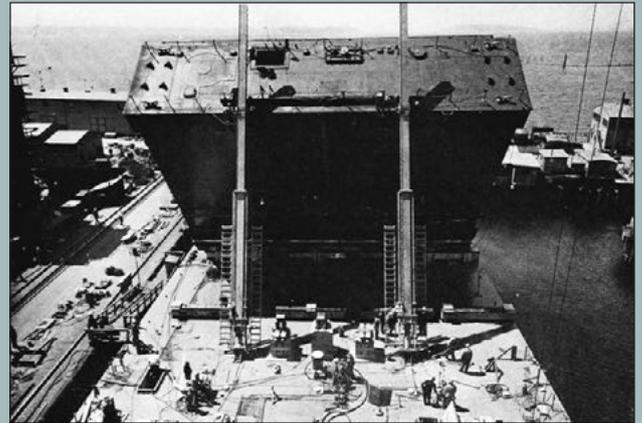


The USS West Virginia undergoing repairs in the ABSD-1, anchored in Pallikulo Bay between Barrier Beach and Aese Island. Photo US Archives.

were required, the repair crews based on Santo just had to make do. That was until ABSD-1 and two smaller floating dry docks arrived in Vanuatu – the former moored in Palikulo Bay, the latter in Segond Channel, just off Aore Island.

ABSD-1 or Advance Base Sectional Dock (to use the Navy's correct nomenclature), was an enormous steel floating dry dock, that was shipped to Santo in two separate convoys between July and October 1943. Capable of lifting ships displacing up to 90,000 tons,

she was comprised of 10 separate sections, constructed in the United States between 1942 and 1943.



One of the enormous wing walls being raised after the arrival of the dry dock section on site. Photo US Archives.

The wing walls were generally constructed in an upright position to make the construction process as time efficient as possible. However prior to towing at sea, the wing walls which were anchored by a series of hinges, were lowered into a horizontal position. Towing the sections in this manner to their final destination for final welding, reduced wind resistance and lowered the centre of gravity.

Following alignment, heavy steel plates were welded in position from one section to another across the top and bottom joints and the inside and outside faces of the wing walls. Once welded together the assembled dry dock had an incredible integral strength with a 'moment of resistance' of about 500,000 foot-tons, which was approximately a quarter of the largest Navy vessel to be docked.



January 12, 1944 and the USS Cleveland undergoes repairs in ABSD-1.

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The USS Antelope and LST-120 undergoing maintenance in ABSD-1 in January 1945. Photo US Navy.

The location of the ABSD-1 dry dock in Santo was critical to its successful operation. The large dock required at least 80 feet (24.3m) of depth for effective use - hence why it was positioned in the relatively deep waters of Pallikulo Bay. And to ensure it would resist tidal movement and the seasonal threat of cyclone activity, it was secured by 32 fifteen-ton anchors, 14 on either side and two at either end, attached with 900 feet (274.3m) of chain.

ABSD-1 served in the waters of Santo until mid-April 1945 repairing an enormous variety of ships including



An unknown US Navy ship in the floating dry dock ABSD-1, February 1944. Photo US Archives.

the battleships Idaho and California, the USS Cleveland and USS Columbia - both light cruisers, along with a range of landing ships, gunboats and cargo vessels.

Post war, the gigantic USS ABSD-1 enjoyed a somewhat chequered, but active career. In various

iterations, her sections were decommissioned, divided, put in reserve, scrapped, reused and recommissioned a number of times in Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines. Six sections went on to be utilised during the Korean War before being towed to the Philippines in 1970 where the floating dry dock - somewhat smaller than her original size - was placed back in service.

Section by section AFDB-1 was decommissioned over a number of years with the last remaining section, Section C, reclassified as a miscellaneous vessel on March 2, 1998, ending over 40 years of service with the US Navy.



USNS Spica dry docked at Ship Repair Facility Subic Bay, Philippines in Artisan (AFDB-1), 1 January 1987. Defense Imagery photo DNST9301078.

Or so we thought.

Back in January 2022, the Museum was contacted by Andy Werback in the United States. He was looking for any information we might have on ABSD-1 for a large scale model he was wishing to build of one of the pontoons, complete with wing walls and all internal detailing.

We of course sent him everything we had, including a fantastic article from an early edition of Popular Science Magazine that featured cutaways of the interiors. That really got Andy going and from then on he and Museum Project Manager James Carter sent each other bits and pieces of research as they were discovered.

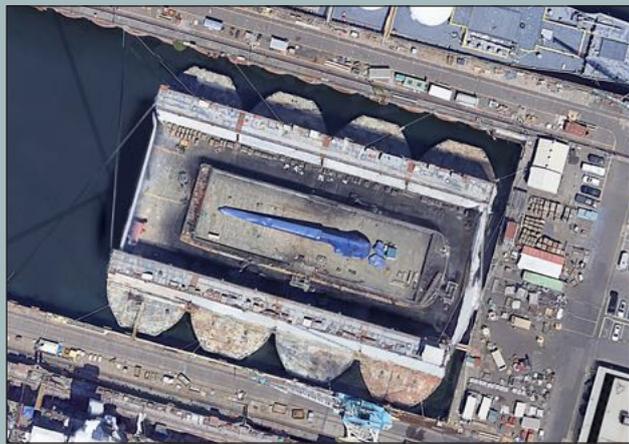
In June of 2022, Andy visited the US Archives and managed to source a set of blueprints for ABSD-1. These were perfect for his use and provided him with just about everything he needed to complete his scale model.

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Late in 2022, Andy's daughter Katie was transferred to the US Army Corps of Engineers, Portland District.

They have a couple of dredging ships for maintaining the waterways and she was able to arrange a visit to show the model to interested people at the Corps in December 2022. This was where things got very interesting.

Further research led to the discovery that two sites probably had old WWII dry docks still in use. And as luck would have it, Portland was one of them.



Two sections of ABSD-1 and two sections of ABSD-2 in Portland Harbour at Vigor Industrial. Photo Google Earth.

The USACE's ship Essayons was in the floating dry dock at the time and Katie was able to arrange a full presentation to interested staff from Vigor Industrial - the company overseeing the maintenance work on the ship.



ABSD-1 and ABSD-2 ready to receive their next ship. The blocks of timber are keel blocks used to support the ships. Photo Andy Werback.

Andy also did a tour of the facility, just last week. Sure enough, there were two sections of the original ABSD-1 and two from ABSD-2, in the harbour and still in use today.

Andy toured the dry dock and got to see it inside and out. His photographs from the cold winter's day are featured with this article.



One of Andy's many shots showing the interior of ABSD-1. This is the crew deck and parts storage. Photo Andy Werback.

It's been an absolutely remarkable find for Andy and ourselves, knowing that sections of the incredible floating dry dock of Santo, are still in existence, thanks to some great research and a whole lot of coincidences that led Andy to find them.



Andy's incredible 'scratchbuilt' model of one of the pontoons comes complete with all interior detailing. This model was not built from a kit spourced at a hobby store. As the name suggests Andy had to scratch build everything. Photo Andy Werback.

Once Andy has completed further presentations, he has offered his model to the South Pacific WWII Museum. As you can probably imagine, we're very excited to have been offered Andy's ABSD-1 and can't wait to put it on show later this year.

In the meantime, Andy's model and his story are being featured in his local paper, The Press Democrat in Santa Rosa, California. Keep an eye out for it online.

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

Tough nut.

Any veteran of the war in the South Pacific could have told you what Rabaul was. The toughest nut in the Japanese campaign to take the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, and places south – including the New Hebrides (Vanuatu).

The town, on the island of New Britain, had been captured in January 1942, despite resistance from a small Australian garrison.

The Allies at one point had contemplated turning it in a significant naval base, but now that task fell to the Japanese.



Nine months after the first air raids on Rabaul, shorter range aircraft are able to reach the base. Here from November 1943 is a famous picture of a daring low level raid on shipping. Photo Australian War memorial.

It was an ideal anchorage from which Japanese ships and airpower could reach further southeast, and to the southwest. For that reason over time it was equipped with strong anti-aircraft defences, and defending fighters, as well as bombers to threaten shipping.

The Allies did not waste time in trying to disrupt the build-up. Two carrier raids in February 1942 had some success, although it was perhaps not the best use to put the precious flat-tops to at this perilous stage of the war.

Most air attacks would be from land based aircraft, and these missions too began in February 1942.

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On the 23rd, a month after its fall to Japanese landing forces, Rabaul was bombed by six B-17s of the Fifth Air Force.



B-25 bombers over Rabaul Harbour, Papua New Guinea, following a raid in early 1944. Photo National WWII Museum.

This attack, mounted from Townsville, Australia, was the first of a series of raids by small groups of Allied heavy bombers on the enemy base.

Between March and August, planes dropped an average of 130 tons of bombs a month on targets at Rabaul.

Only a relatively small number of Allied planes had enough range to participate in Rabaul raids, and those few were husbanded carefully by scheduling most strikes at night.



A U.S. Marine Corps dive-bomber scores a direct hit on a Japanese oil tanker near Rabaul in July of 1944. Photo warfarehistorynetwork.com

It was only later, as the Allies advanced up the Solomons chain, could shorter range aircraft join in. Rabaul became a regular target, and a dangerous one.

But by the time the war ended, it had been isolated, its garrison left to "wither on the vine."

Inspiring everyday heroes

When a powerful cyclone struck two eastern provinces of New Zealand's North Island on February the 14th, it caused devastation for thousands.

Among those caught by floodwaters from rapidly-rising rivers were hundreds of RSE workers, many from Vanuatu.

Some had to shelter on rooftops until rescued by helicopters. The orchards and vineyards they worked on have been inundated by silt and water, some beyond immediate repair.

None lost their lives, but have faced the uncertainty of where to live, how to eat, and whether their jobs may be gone.

The Pasifika Medical Association, a group of trained Pasifika health workers, has been on the ground in Hawke's Bay providing free health services to affected RSE workers.

The Commissioner of Labour, Ms Murielle Meltenoven, and the New Zealand High Commission in Vanuatu wish to assure everyone that all RSE workers in New Zealand are accounted for and safe – and that their welfare is a priority for the Vanuatu and New Zealand governments.

All Ni-Vanuatu RSE workers have now been able to return to their farms or to other suitable, approved,

accommodation. There's plenty of clean-up work to do, and the New Zealand government has promised to make it easier to move the workers elsewhere, or return them home early if they wish.

In a cruel twist, the start of March has seen Vanuatu itself hit by two cyclones, Judy, and then Kevin. We do not know the full extent of the damage yet.



Ni-Vanuatu RSE workers helping move supplies at an evacuation centre in New Zealand. Photo courtesy of the Vanuatu Daily Post.

So our Inspiring Everyday Heroes this month are all those who are working to stay strong, keeping safe, and helping others through these difficult times.

Thanks to the Vanuatu Daily Post for some of the information used here.

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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