

**SOUTH PACIFIC WWII
MUSEUM**
VANUATU

South Pacific WWII Museum

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Janet returns to the museum



Janet Frouin and her sister Michelle with the Collidge's bell.

In October last year, the museum was honoured to be the recipient of a very special piece to add to our collection. Janet Frouin and her family generously donated the SS President Coolidge's bell to the South Pacific WWII Museum, following the 80th anniversary of the sinking of the world-famous ship.

Fast forward 12 months – and for the first time since donating the bell – Janet accompanied by her sister Michelle visited the museum and was once again reunited with the beautiful brass bell her father Reece Discombe recovered around 50 years ago.

Thank you for visiting us Janet and Michelle and we hope to see you again very soon.

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A short history of Bomber 3

Bomber Number 3 Airfield on Espiritu Santo marked the culmination of airstrip development in the Luganville region during World War II.

The airfield, strategically positioned on a ridge in the hills northwest of the town, was a significant endeavour for the 40th Battalion when they arrived on Santo on February 3, 1943.

The primary task of the 40th Battalion was the construction of a third bomber field in Luganville. They tackled the daunting challenge of carving out a 6,800 ft by 300 ft (2,072 m by 91 m) runway, complete with 27,000 ft (8229 m) of taxiway and 75 hardstands, all within a densely forested landscape.



Massive quantities of coral had to be excavated to create the Bomber #3 runway and taxiways. Photo US Archives.

A remarkable aspect of this project was that almost a quarter of the runway had to be cut through solid coral, with depths ranging from a few feet to an impressive 35 ft (10.6 m).

Additionally, 3,000 ft (914 m) of taxiway and six hardstands were similarly excavated in solid coral, averaging 10 ft (3 m) in depth. The coral extracted from these cuts and borrow pits was used for surfacing and necessary fill. Due to the region's heavy rainfall, the coral surface was treated with an emulsified asphalt binder to ensure the coral wasn't washed away.

Beyond the runway, the airfield was equipped with essential facilities for operational purposes. These included a tank farm housing six 1,000-barrel steel tanks, two truck-loading stations, two repair areas,



Caterpillar dozers pulling scrapers or 'carry-alls' level the thick coral base of the runway at Bomber #3. Photo US Archives.

fifteen 40 x 10 ft (12 x 3 m) arch-rib warehouses, one substantial 100 x 90 ft (30.4 x 27.4 m) hangar, eighteen 20 x 48 ft (6 x 14.6 m) quonset huts for living quarters, six mess halls, and all necessary utilities. To provide access to and facilitate the operation of the airfield, a staggering fifteen miles of two-lane road was cleared through dense jungle.

Bomber Number 3 Airfield was notable for its asphalt coating, which distinguished it from airfields that relied on Marston matting. This distinction allowed it to serve a dual purpose during the 1950s and 1960s as a civil airport, eventually becoming known as Luganville Airport.



The completed Bomber #3 airfield with its asphalt coating which helped prevent gravel damaging aircraft. Photo US Archives. (continued...)



A TAI DC-3 passenger aircraft after skidding off the runway upon landing at the old Bomber Number 3 airfield in 1957.

Some local residents even recollect cycling to the airfield to witness the historic arrival of the late Queen Elizabeth II during her royal visit to the territory in the early 1960s. Naturally, there were incidents and memorable moments at the airfield during these times.

When the need for facility upgrades arose, the decision was made to renovate Pekoia and close Bomber 3. The airfield still remains accessible today, with the road to the Millennium Caves – a popular tourist attraction – running directly through the former airfield.



Bomber #2 facing south east, as it was during the war. This is now Santo International Airport. Photo US Archives.



Bomber #3 Airfield as it is today. The runway has been turned into a road running across the plateau at the top of the hill. Towards the top left of the photo you can see Luganville in the distance. Photo Kevin Green.

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

The ship that refused to go down without a fight

In October 1942, a US destroyer finally succumbed to a torpedo that struck it a month earlier. The attack that caught the USS O'Brien is considered the deadliest single submarine salvo in World War 2.

But when the destroyer had struggled into Espiritu Santo on September the 16th, there was cause for optimism she could be patched up enough to sail back to the US.



USS O'Brien DD-415, photographed soon after completion, circa 1940. Photo Naval History and Heritage Command.

The day before, O'Brien had been part of an escort for a marine convoy to embattled Guadalcanal.

But it was not the target of the Japanese submarine I-19. Commanded by Takakazu Kinashi, I-19 had daringly slipped under the screen and closed within 500 metres of the aircraft carrier USS Wasp. He fired six torpedoes – three slammed into the carrier, fatally crippling the vessel.

But the torpedoes that missed carried on a further 12 miles - hitting the battleship North Carolina, and the O'Brien. The battlewagon would be out of the war for two months.

The strike that hit the destroyer however was nowhere near fatal. With pumps operating she proceeded at 13 knots to Espiritu Santo, a journey of 280 miles.

There the repair vessel Curtis went to work, divers working for 40 hours to repair holes, while cement was poured as a temporary strengthening of parts of the hull.

(continued..)



The USS O'Brien is torpedoed by the Japanese submarine I-19 during the Guadalcanal Campaign, on 15 September 1942. The aircraft carrier USS Wasp (CV-7), torpedoed a few minutes earlier, is burning in the left distance. O'Brien was hit in the extreme bow, but "whipping" from the torpedo explosion caused serious damage to her hull amidships. Photo US Archives.

150 five-inch shells and all her depth charges bar two were unloaded.

On September 21st, O'Brien took to the seas again, completing a 600 mile voyage to Noumea in two days. There it received further repairs, and offloaded its torpedoes, AA ammunition, and other equipment.



The USS Curtis in the Segond Channel at Espiritu Santo. A PBY Catalina is moored in the foreground. Photo US Archives.

The next stop would be Mare Island shipyard in the US, where proper repairs could be made.

But the O'Brien was now struggling. Leaks began to worsen and in the dry language of an official report, sections of the destroyer began operating in different directions. By then the crew had been mustered, and every attempt made to lighten the load on the ship.



The Japanese submarine that sank the Wasp and O'Brien, I-19.

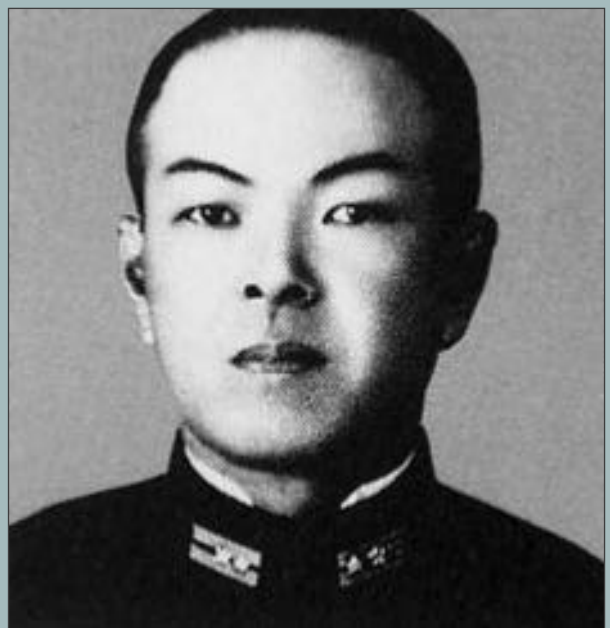
By 4:30 in the morning the forward engine room was flooded, and the ship, except for a small salvage crew, was abandoned 90 minutes later. It would sink two hours later. The O'Brien had sailed some 2800 miles since being torpedoed, but it was concluded that key repairs had been inadequate.

(continued...)

The career of the man who sunk O'Brien would meanwhile continue in spectacular fashion.

Takakazu Kinashi was promoted and granted an interview with Emperor Hirohito for his feats.

Then transferring to command of I-29, in December 1943 he set out to sail to occupied France, reaching the now Nazi base of St Lorient in March 1944, laden with rare precious supplies for the German war effort. While his crew rested, he was taken to Berlin where Hitler awarded him the Iron Cross second class.



Japanese submarine commander, Takakazu Kinashi

I-29 then began the long trip home, carrying parts and blueprints for Germany's latest jet fighter.

Kinashi never made it. Tipped off by Ultra intelligence intercepts, I-29 was caught on the surface by a pack of three American submarines and torpedoed not long after leaving Singapore.

The submarine ace was posthumously promoted two levels, to the rank of rear admiral.

Caterpillar assault

THE FOLLOWING STORY CONTAINS GRAPHIC CONTENT.

On October 27, 1943, a group of eight Seabees and their commanding officer from Company A of Naval Construction Battalion (NCB) 87 (Seabees) arrived on Mono Island shortly after the island's assault had commenced.

Mono Island is situated within the Treasury Islands, which are part of the Solomon Islands, and it held significant strategic importance for the planned invasion of Bougainville, located 28 miles to the north.

Company A disembarked with two bulldozers and a jeep, their primary mission being to carve a road through the dense jungle along the shoreline. They were joined by an engineering reconnaissance team of 25 men from Headquarters Company and were assigned to support the Eighth New Zealand Brigade, which was already heavily engaged in combat upon their arrival.

A massive landing ship tank (LST) ran aground and opened its colossal bow doors to unload its cargo.

The assaulting troops faced relentless enemy fire, including bombings, mortar attacks, and machine gun fire, suffering heavy casualties at the hands of the Japanese forces. Notably, a well-fortified Japanese pillbox, housing a cannon and machine guns, was strategically positioned near the LST's location, obstructing any advance from the beach.

Protecting the valuable transport ship and rapidly offloading its cargo became imperative. With each

passing minute, the risk of a Japanese air strike grew. The enemy forces within the pillbox had to be swiftly neutralised. Of course being a construction battalion, there were no tanks available. However, bulldozers were at hand.

Leading this daring mission was Lt. Charles E. Turnbull, who issued orders to Machinists Mate First Class Aurelio Tassone to engage the pillbox using his 24-ton D-8 bulldozer.



Equipment is quickly unloaded from LST-485. New Zealand war artist Russell Clark's watercolor Landing Ships Under Fire, Falamai, Treasury Islands. Original painting Archives New Zealand.

Tassone raised the bulldozer's blade to create a makeshift shield and cautiously approached the pillbox. Lt. Turnbull followed closely on foot, staying about 10 feet to the side and behind the bulldozer, armed with a carbine to provide covering fire.

Under a continuous barrage of heavy enemy fire, Tassone advanced his bulldozer towards the pillbox, lowering the blade to crush the barricade and bury its occupants beneath tons of earth and logs.



Aurelio Tassone and Lt. Charles E. Turnbull atop the D-8 dozer, which Tassone named "Helen" after his wife. Photo Seabee Museum.

For their remarkable bravery and actions, Turnbull and Tassone were later honoured with the Silver Star.

This operation, carried out in conjunction with a raid on Choiseul, served as a diversion to divert the attention of the Japanese Seventeenth Army away from the next major Allied target in the Solomon Islands campaign.

The success of this operation also contributed to the enhancement of planning for subsequent landings in the Pacific.



Aurelio Tassone receives the Silver Star Medal from Comdr. Easterly, 87th Officer in Charge. Photo Seabee Museum.

MEET THE SEABEE WHOSE BULLDOZER SMASHED A JAP PILLBOX...

Here on

AURELIO TASSONE MM1c HAS A STORY FOR YOU!

Seabees - Incentive Program (Advance Bases)

Machinists Mate First Class Aurelio Tassone became somewhat of personality and went on a tour of Advanced Bases such as Base Buton on Santo. Photo Seabee Museum.

Santo's other shipwreck

The SS President Coolidge is undoubtedly the most renowned shipwreck in Espiritu Santo, widely recognised by divers and historians worldwide. This iconic vessel has firmly established itself as one of Vanuatu's top tourist attractions. In fact, the South Pacific World War II Museum features a dedicated exhibition about the mighty ship, which consistently draws the fascination of both tourists and locals.

Nevertheless, amidst the shadow of the Coolidge's fame, there lies the tale of a lesser-known shipwreck that unfolded just three months prior under strikingly similar circumstances. This is the story of the USS Tucker.

Division 6, stationed in San Diego. During the late 1930s, it operated along the west coast and in Hawaii. In February 1939, the USS Tucker participated in *Fleet Problem XX* in the Caribbean before returning to Hawaii on February 14, 1941. It later embarked on a cruise to Auckland, reaching its destination on March 17, and traversed the South Pacific before returning to San Diego on September 19. Subsequently, it returned to Hawaii to join Task Force 19 (TF-19).

On December 7, 1941, the USS Tucker was moored at berth X-8 in the East Loch of Pearl Harbour. To its port side lay the USS Selfridge (DD-357), and to the



Mahan-class destroyer USS Tucker leaving Norfolk Navy Yard after completion, 2 Mar 1937. Photo US Navy.

The USS Tucker, a Mahan-class destroyer, was constructed at the Norfolk Navy Yard in Norfolk, Virginia. Its keel was laid on August 15, 1934, and it was christened as USS Tucker (DD-374) when launched on February 26, 1936, honouring Samuel Tucker, a distinguished officer in the Continental Navy and the United States Navy. The vessel was commissioned on July 23, 1936, with Lieutenant Commander George T. Howard assuming command.

After completing its shakedown cruise, the Tucker was assigned to Destroyer Squadron 3, Destroyer

starboard, the USS Reid (DD-365). During the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, the Tucker retaliated with anti-aircraft fire from its machine guns and fired its 5-inch guns, successfully downing two attacking planes.

Following the attack, the Tucker patrolled the waters off Pearl Harbour and escorted convoys from the west coast to Hawaii over the next five months. Subsequently, it departed for the South Pacific, escorting the USS Wright (AV-1) to Tutuila, Suva, and finally Noumea.

(continued..)



A rare colour photograph showing Destroyer Squadron 3, Destroyer Division 6 ships Clark, Case, Cummings, Shaw, and Tucker at San Diego, California, United States, Oct 1941.

On April 27, 1942, the USS Tucker entered Sydney Harbour for refuelling, continuing its journey to Melbourne, Perth, and Fremantle before returning to Sydney Harbour.

On June 3, 1942, the USS Tucker arrived in Suva with the USS Wright and operated in the waters off Fiji until early July. On July 10, 1942, it departed, escorting a convoy and reached Auckland on July 30, 1942. The following day, the Tucker set sail for Fiji, tasked with escorting the cargo ship SS Nira Luckenbach to Espiritu Santo, departing on August 1, 1942.



The SS Nira Luckenbach that the Tucker escorted to Espiritu Santo. Photo shipspotting.com

Tragically, on August 2, three destroyers – USS Gamble (DM-15), USS Breese (DM-18), and USS Tracy (DM-19) – had laid a minefield in the Segond Channel. Unbeknownst to the Tucker and other ships, the presence of this new minefield had not been communicated.

On August 4, as the Tucker guided the cargo ship towards the harbour at Espiritu Santo through the western entrance, disaster struck. At 9:45 pm, the

Tucker struck at least one mine, causing a devastating explosion that nearly tore the ship in two at the No. 1 stack, claiming the lives of all three crew members on watch in the forward fire room.

Fortunately, the remaining crew members survived the ordeal. The SS Nira Luckenbach and other vessels rushed to rescue the sailors from the sinking USS Tucker. The stern of the Tucker sank the following morning, and a diving team scuttled and sank the bow.



USS Tucker after nearly being blown in two by a mine is towed by the stern toward shallow water by YP-346 in the Segond Channel, Santo, 4 Aug 1942.

Three days after the Tucker's demise, the seagoing tugboat Navajo arrived at the site with divers, commencing the salvage operation, recovering its guns, turbines, anchors, and chains.

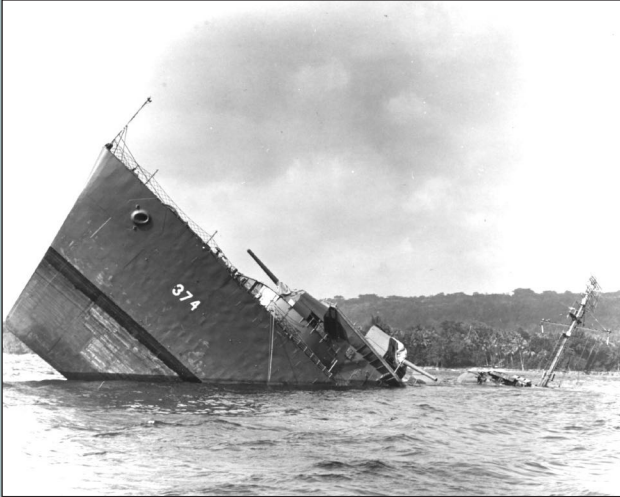
An investigation into the incident revealed that the Tucker's captain had not been informed about the minefield. As a consequence, the USS Tucker was removed from the Naval Vessel Register on December 2, 1944.



Minelayer USS Breese standing by as a motor launch tows the wreck of the Tucker toward shallow water off Malo Island, 4 Aug 1942.

(continued..)

The loss of the Tucker dealt a blow to the Pacific Fleet's efforts to gather every available ship for the Battle of Guadalcanal.



The bow section of the sunken destroyer USS Tucker out of the water off Malo Island just inside the Segond Channel in Santo.

Throughout the remainder of the war, the wreckage site of the USS Tucker served as a training ground for divers, with no further salvage attempts made. Resting in just 18 meters (60 feet) of water, the ship became accessible to private salvors who harvested anything of value, contributing to the scattering of the Tucker's remains.

The site also suffered from the activities of sport divers, and by 1997, it had transformed into what was described as an "underwater junkyard," as noted by underwater photojournalist Mike Gerken, who explored the site multiple times.

In 2013, Mike paid homage to the Tucker and other sunken ships in an article for *Wreck Diving Magazine*, emphasizing the importance of preserving the memory of these vessels by sharing their stories. He wrote in part:

"To see a ship with a distinguished record as the Tucker in such a poor state gave me pause for thought. I pondered that wrecks, like the Tucker, will gradually disappear and to be saddened by this inevitable fact would be pointless. What is important is that the memory of these ships be kept alive by telling their stories."

The USS Tucker and the SS President Coolidge shared similar fates on opposite sides of the same island, in the same shipping channel, within a span of less than three months. Both vessels succumbed to different locations within the same U.S. Navy minefield and later became popular diving sites, each with its own unique history and significance.



A diver explores the wreck of the USS Tucker in the Segond Channel, Espiritu Santo. Photo diveplanit.com

Inspiring everyday heroes

Three times in eight months. That's the toll that tropical cyclones are taking on Vanuatu. So once again, our heroes are the people whose resilience in the face of natural disaster is simply amazing. The latest is Cyclone Lola.

It's early days but it's estimated more than 10,000 households have been affected, some destroyed along with schools. Four provinces in the northeast - Malampa, Sanma, Penama and Torba - were hit hardest.

Humanitarian aid groups and Vanuatu's National Disaster management staff were however still making initial assessments.

Lola was a Category 5 storm when it first made landfall in Pentecost Island. Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai flew over the worst-affected areas on board a Royal Australian Air Force aircraft to survey the initial damage. He promised to help those most in need.

Head of World Vision Vanuatu, Kendra Drousseau, said as of October 27, there were "currently no injuries or deaths reported", but a "large medical ship was on its way".

It was reported that schools in Pentecost Island collapsed like pick-up sticks, with roofs blown off and classrooms flooded and torn apart by fallen trees.

UNICEF Pacific child protection officer Rebecca Olul said it was devastating for children and their families

as "cyclones are becoming the new normal". In fact, some children have experienced three or four cyclones before they reach the age of six.

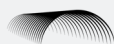
Many schools on Pentecost Island have not recovered from twin cyclones in March, let alone the devastating Cyclone Harold in 2020, with some still using tarpaulin sheets to cover classrooms.



Ranwadi College, South Pentecost, has been severely hit by Cyclone Lola.

Our heartfelt thoughts are with those affected, that they get what they need to bounce back once more, and that this is the very worst of the cyclone season.

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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