

**SOUTH PACIFIC WWII
MUSEUM**
VANUATU

South Pacific WWII Museum

Subscriber's newsletter

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One smile says it all

Since opening the museum's new exhibition space, we've been super-busy with locals and visitors from nearby islands and overseas keen to see our new exhibits including our Willys Jeep.

We're immensely proud of the extension, and judging by the smile on the face of this recent young visitor, we think it'll remain hugely popular for a long time to come.



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Before you go

The South Pacific WWII Museum relies on donations to keep the doors open, provide for our schools' program and ensure dog tags find their way back home. So if you're visiting us, we'd very much appreciate your support through our new donation box - you can't miss it.



Museum Chairman Bradley Wood with our new donation box at the Museum.

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

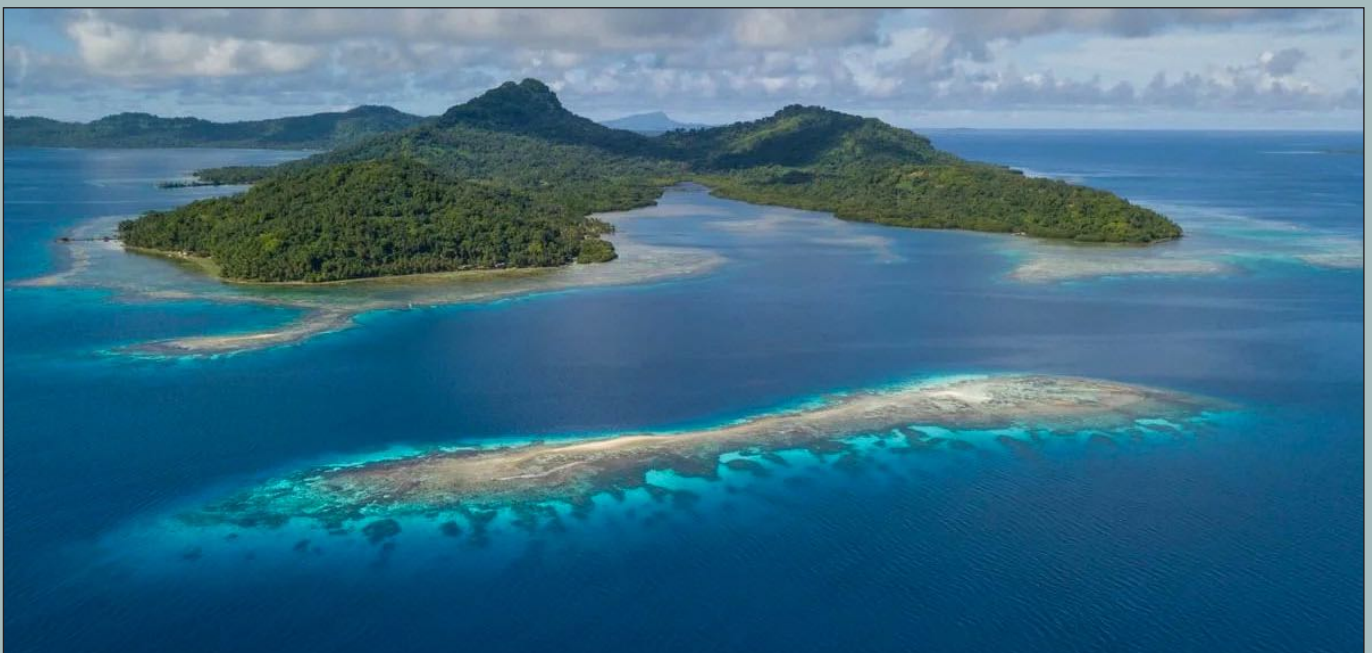
The Japanese Pearl Harbour

The battle for Truk

In February 1944, the US Navy launched massive carrier airstrikes on the Japanese base of Truk in the Caroline Islands

The 39-mile wide lagoon there had been a key anchorage for the Japanese Navy – and as a target, had a reputation shared only by Rabaul.

Yet for such an important place, the Americans knew very little about what they might encounter there – a place dubbed the Japanese Pearl Harbour.



The breathtaking Truk lagoon as it is today. A diving nirvana with the greatest concentration of sunken wrecks in one place than anywhere else on the planet. Photo masterliveboards.com

After obtaining the Carolines as the spoils of Germany's defeat in World War One, Japan had gone to great lengths to keep its military facilities their secret. Foreigners could not fly over the area, and mapping and charting were strictly forbidden to outsiders.

However, by the beginning of 1944, Truk became within range of reconnaissance planes flying from the Solomons – and the job was allocated to a squadron that had just recently arrived at Espiritu Santo.

Marine Photographic Squadron flew four-engine PB4Ys, a version of the Liberator bomber – with fuel tanks where bombs would go.

Four planes would make the flight, staging out of nearby Bougainville. Except the one airstrip long

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enough to take the giant planes was new – and the Marston matting kept rolling up – meaning the planes couldn't get up to take-off speed. The squadron commander then picked Stirling Island, recently captured, where a new strip had been laid over firmer coral.



PB4Y-1P photo reconnaissance aircraft of VD-1 near Guadalcanal, 1944. Cameras are on the bottom of the aircraft and in the tail behind the star. Photo pacificairlifter.com/vpnavy.org

On February the 1st, four planes took off from Espiritu Santo, also carrying mechanics and spares. The next day, three of the four took off. Last rites had been performed for the crews by a chaplain – this could be a one way mission.

As John Bishop recounts, in the US Naval Institute's Naval History Magazine, the problems began right from the start:



The crew of Consolidated PB4Y-1 Privateer, BuNo 31995 (ex- USAAF 42-40188), "Hell's Angel", belonging to VPB-102, possibly taken on Espiritu Santo. Photo San Diego Air and Space Museum.

"Each aircraft carried 3,450 gallons of fuel, a full load of ammunition, and a crew of 11. Take-off weight was estimated at 65,000 pounds—5,000 pounds more than the recommended maximum take-off gross weight. The distance to Truk was a bit more than 1,000 nautical

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Stirling Island Airfield, Treasury Island, Solomons, with its cliff at the end of the runway. Photo Photo Naval Heritage and History Command.

miles, and the pilots wanted every gallon of fuel they could carry. Stirling's runway stretched the length of the island with a sheer cliff at the end that dropped 200 feet straight down to the sea. The planes were so overloaded that they dropped out of sight over the cliff as they accelerated to climb speed. The ground crews lost sight of the aircraft in the heavy rain as they rolled down the strip; only engine sounds told them that the planes were airborne."



USS Intrepid underway 26 Jan 1944 on her way to launch strikes against Truk Atoll (now Chuuk). Photo WWII Database.

Four hours in, and facing strong headwinds, one of the aircraft developed engine troubles, and the decision was made to abort the mission.

Two days later, on February 4, two of the planes made another attempt. The weather was bad, and they became separated, but some pinpoint navigation brought them over an anchorage packed with warships and other shipping. And Zero fighters, and an anti-aircraft barrage. The full drama of what went on is best read in the full account of the mission, here:

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/1999/february/photo-mission-truk>

But after a 12 hour round trip – both planes made it home – their precious film rushed to a developing lab on Bougainville. Giant prints were made – and an even bigger three-dimensional model of Truk created.

Thanks to the squadron's work, the US carriers two weeks later had the best information they were ever going to get about Truk – and they used it to devastating effect. 264 planes were shot down and 37 ships sunk – inadvertently creating perhaps the world's greatest dive spot for wrecked vessels.



The Japanese naval base, warships, and fishing boats at Dublon Island under American aerial attack, Truk Atoll, Caroline Islands, 16 Feb 1944. Photo WWII Database.

Prudently, and no doubt spooked by the overflight of the PB4Ys, the Imperial Japanese Navy had pulled out its big warships. The mass attack later would only confirm that at last, Truk had finally been made untenable as a Pacific bastion.

When Jesus came to Big Bay

The US Archives is full of amazing documents, photographs, maps, films and so much more. In fact, in its holdings are mind-blowing – 13.5 billion pieces of paper, 41 million photographs, 33 billion electronic records a catalogue containing 239,433,214 pages of digitised records and so it goes on.

So, it's probably not surprising that it contains a wonderful collection of records and materials related to Base Button on Espiritu Santo during World War II.

One of those is the story of Robie Robertson.

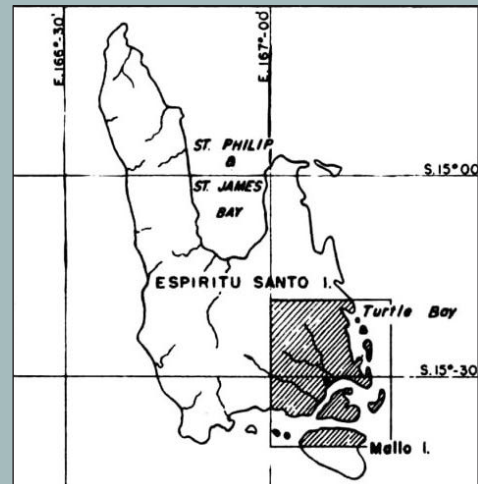


The man himself, Robie Robertson, described as a "typical planter of the South Seas." Here he's posing with a type of drum from Hog Harbour.

In the lead up to Base Button being established on Espiritu Santo, many landholders across the island were consulted regarding the establishment of airfields and base infrastructure on their properties.

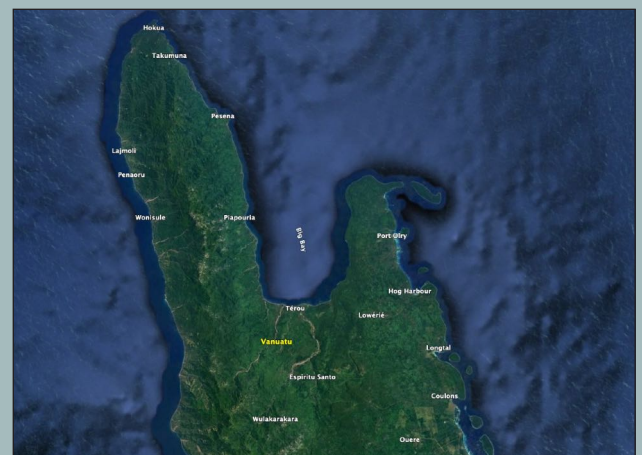
The majority of which were happy to lease their land to the US military, as long as they were fairly compensated, which most were.

One of those to be interviewed was William Torrie Robertson, a long-time resident of Espiritu Santo, whose residence was four miles west of the Jordan River in what was known as St. James and St. Philips Bay (now known as Big Bay).



A map of Espiritu Santo featuring the previous name of Big Bay, St. Philip and St. James Bay. Photo US Archives.

It was around August 1942 when two American officers called upon Mr. Robertson (better known locally as Robie) at his Big Bay 'rancho', where he was reputed to have a few thousand head of cattle. The officers were interested in the construction of a fighter field in that area, saying it would be about 50 miles (80 Kilometres) closer to the Solomons than fields in the Segond or Pallikulo areas. Whether the subsequent turn of events or other factors caused the plan to be dropped, Robie was unable to say.



Big Bay as it is today. Photo Google Earth.

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LtCol Evans Carlson, USMC (Carlson's Raiders), after the Makin Island Raid. Photo Naval Heritage and History Command.

He had quite vivid memories of the famous Carlson's Raiders training around Big Bay and the surprise with which he greeted their unannounced arrival during night manoeuvres.

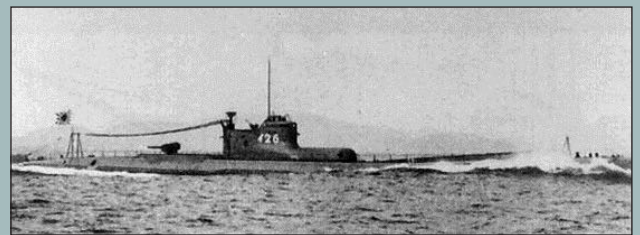
Some of the natives also reported to Robie having seen a strange object in the bay at times which they explained to him as "no crocodile – something blong Pere". It was a Japanese submarine.



Marine Raiders gathered in front of a Japanese dugout on Cape Torokina on Bougainville, Solomon Islands, which they helped to take. Photo US Archives.

Apparently, it had a cross piece on its conning tower (most likely an antenna) that made them think of the cross about which the padre, Pere had told them. This was during May and June of 1942.

Robie believed that the submarines surfaced at night just outside the river entrances, of which there are about five in the area, and used search lights to assist members of the crew in rubber rafts to catch fish, which the Japanese were said to be very fond, and which are to be found in Big Bay in great numbers.



A Japanese B1 submarine, of the type that operated in the waters around the New Hebrides in World War II. Photo wikipedia.

The impunity with which they used lights and surfaced in the day also left the impression that there was nothing to fear from American aircraft or surface vessels.

The arrival of the Army in Second Channel and the pitching of hundreds of their tents ashore was reported to him by his Ni-Vanuatu neighbours as "too much man in calico house".

The locals also thought the troops strange to waste so many bullets in target practice, for to them they were most valuable and to be used only to kill something, probably better yet, someone.

So concerned with the target practice they reported to him, "all mad – chuck 'em too much cartridge – cranky men".

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USS Wasp (CV-7) burning on 15 September 1942, during the Battle of Santa Cruz. Photo Naval Heritage and History Command.

During the battle of Santa Cruz Robie said he heard the planes passing over Port Olry all night long and could hear the reports of the heavy bombarding to the north of Espiritu Santo.

Robie later assisted Major Palmer of the Marines in some of his searches for crashed aircraft.

One account was of two Army men who were forced down in their Cub aircraft about 24 kilometres (15 miles) inland in an area southwest of Port Olry. Before the day was over another aircraft located the spot in which they had come down.



A restored Piper Cub similar to the one that crashed on Santo.

The downed fliers received rations, supplies, directions, etc., and told to proceed to the coast where a rescue party would be sent in to get them. Such was the nature of the terrain that it took them eleven days to reach the coast, only 24 kilometres (15 miles) away.

One of Robie's funniest stories concerned one of his native boys up in Big Bay who saw a Marine flyer parachute from his plane in the Big Bay area.

It happened near Robie's ranch and the local Ni-Vanuatu boy was quite close to him at the time. Both had been observing the aircraft which apparently had been in distress. After bailing out the aviator attempted to extricate himself from a tangle with his parachute and from the action of his legs, he appeared to be going through the motions of walking.

The Ni-Vanuatu boy was all eyes and overcome by this extraordinary phenomenon, something entirely new to him.

He hurried to Robie and in his excitement and pointing at the parachutist, now nearing the ground, he said, "Mastah! Mastah! You look him. Him win him Jesus Christ!" "What do you mean?" Robie asked. "Pere' him say Jesus Christ, him walk on watah. This fellow him walk on air."



A spectacular shot of Big Bay taken from the lookout. Photo by a guest at Bay of Illusions Guesthouse/Trip Advisor.

Sweet donation

Jaden Wood, a local beekeeper and the youngest son of Museum Chairman Bradley Wood, has generously donated 10 jars of his renowned Golden Bee Organic Honey to the Museum. This honey, considered the sweetest and most natural in the South Pacific, is now available for purchase from Marina at the Museum.

His apiary rapidly expanded, boasting 38 hives by his 15th birthday. What started as an after-school hobby soon became a thriving enterprise, yielding hundreds of kilos of honey annually.

At 16, Jaden ventured into hybrid queen rearing, employing selective breeding and artificial insemination in a laboratory he constructed. Using specialized equipment, he anesthetizes queens with carbon dioxide from soft drink bubbles before inseminating them with semen from chosen male drone bees under a microscope.

Beyond his innovative rearing techniques, Jaden has become a local authority on combating bee-related diseases in Vanuatu. Former mentors now seek his advice, a testament to his rapid mastery of the craft.



Jaden Wood hands over his consignment of beautiful looking honey to Marina Moli at the Museum.

Jaden's journey into beekeeping is as remarkable as his honey. At the remarkably young age of 10, he began his beekeeping adventure, quickly amassing 16 hives by the time he turned 12. Demonstrating remarkable aptitude, he began breeding and rearing queen bees at 14.



Beekeepers training organized by the Vanuatu Skills Partnership, Vanuatu Agriculture college, Department of Agriculture and the Department of Industry in Luganville in 2020 aims to increase the number of beekeepers in Vanuatu. Photo Vanuatu Daily Post/Vanuatu Skills Partnership



Jaden's beautifully presented honey in its unique glass jars.

Having completed his schooling, Jaden is now pursuing a full-time career in beekeeping. His company, Golden Bee Organic Honey, boasts over 100 hives and continues to grow, making him the largest beekeeper in Vanuatu.

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Jaden checks his hives to see how honey production is going.

Only five out of the twenty isolated groups of islands in Vanuatu, each separated by over ten kilometres of sea, are home to honeybee populations. Among these, the Efate group of islands stands out with a significant



Jaden shows of a frame of honey ready to be harvested.

bee pest issue known as the varroa mite. This problem can be managed by restricting the movement of live honeybees from Efate to other islands. Fortunately, all other islands remain free from serious diseases and pests affecting honeybees.

Santo, Malekula, Tanna, and Aneitym host European honeybees, which are ideal for honey production. However, on Efate, an invasive species of bee known as the Asian honeybee is present. Unlike the European honeybee, the Asian honeybee is not suitable for honey production.

This invasive species likely entered the country on a shipping vessel and is now spreading across Port Vila and North Santo, posing unwanted competition to the European honeybee, which is responsible for producing high-quality honey, such as that of Jaden's honey.



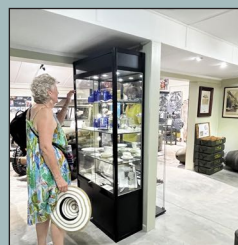
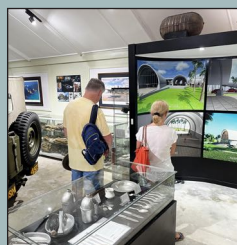
Another of Jaden's frames clearly shows the honeycomb or 'combs' as their called by beekeepers in its frame. Interestingly Jaden's only protection from bee stings is his smoker to the left of frame.

Proud father Bradley remarked, "Jaden has financed his entire enterprise since he was 12. He is incredibly independent and manages every aspect of his business, including a hybridizing lab, honey extraction facility and storage area, which produce thousands of kilos per year."

Brad continued, "Jaden's decision to donate honey to the Museum reflects his kind heart and sweet success. At only 17, he has big plans for the future, and I support him wholeheartedly."

It's cruise ship season

The cruise ships have certainly returned to Vanuatu. During February we had three cruise ships arrive in port – one completely unannounced! Of course Marina at the Museum took it all in her stride and with some assistance from Lyn and a couple of board members who dropped in to help, did an outstanding job hosting everyone.



Inspiring everyday heroes

It doesn't seem like four years since the last Olympics, because, well it isn't.

The Tokyo Olympiad was notably delayed for a year because the world remained in the grip of the pandemic.

But Vanuatu made it there in July 2021 – and how. The small team achieved huge world recognition when flag



Rillio Rii, wowing the world at Tokyo 2021.

bearer and top rower Rillio Rii unashamedly stole the show as a crowd favourite, when he carried the national flag bare-chested into the stadium.

Now the Paris Olympiad is almost upon us. The 2024 Games are in July and August, and helping get Team Vanuatu there will be support from the Australian government.

In a partnership with the Australian National Olympic Committee, it will be providing funding to a number of Pacific countries, particularly Vanuatu.

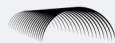
Thanks to the funding, Vanuatu athletes will be able to prepare properly and train in the best possible conditions so that they can perform at the world's biggest competition.

This month, officials from the Vanuatu team for Paris, accompanied by potential athletes, went to the Australian High Commission to celebrate this partnership.

The Pacific Olympic and Paralympic Partnership is supporting more than 250 athletes from 13 Pacific nations across 15 sports, including athletics, swimming, boxing, weightlifting and Rugby 7s.

Vanuatu's team is not picked yet, so there are exciting times ahead for those in contention as they seek a place at the worlds biggest sporting event.

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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