

Vale Mary O'Reilly A Legacy of Service and Friendship

On March 20, we bid farewell to Mary O'Reilly, a remarkable woman whose impact on the South Pacific WWII Museum and the community of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, will be remembered for generations to come. Mary was not only a founding board member of our museum but also a beloved friend and colleague to many.

Originally from New Zealand, Mary first arrived in Vanuatu as a volunteer in 2011, serving as a Waste Management

Adviser for the Luganville Municipality and Sanma Provincial Government. Her passion for sustainable change and capacity building led her to make Vanuatu her home, where she founded her own consulting business in 2015. Mary's dedication to waste management and community development earned her the respect and acceptance of the local Luganville community.



Mary and her husband Rayman both of whom were on the Museum board.

(continued...)

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In addition to her work in waste management, Mary was deeply involved in community service. She served on the board of ProMedical, the local ambulance service, for six years, and was a board member for the South Pacific World War II Museum project. Mary's commitment to serving others and her community was unwavering.



Mary, Rayman and children Benji and Charlie on holiday with Ray's family.

Mary's passing leaves a void in our hearts, but her legacy of service, dedication, and friendship will continue to inspire us.

Our thoughts and prayers are with Mary's family and friends, especially her husband Ray and her children Benji and Charlie, during this difficult time.

May they find comfort in the love and memories they shared with Mary.



The Museum board at the opening of the Museum in 2017. Mary is fourth from the right at the back.

Merlin magic

Australia boasts a rather special gem in the aviation world – a Curtiss P40 aircraft unlike any other.

This stunner, known as the P-40F-1-CU "Pee Wee," is a genuine Merlin engine derivative of the famed P40 Hawk series of fighters. Owned by Judy Pay from the Old Aeroplane Company in Tyabb, Victoria, this particular aircraft has quite the history.

where it was shipped to the New Hebrides in the Southwest Pacific theatre during World War II. Assigned to the 18th Fighter Group, 44th Fighter Squadron, it saw action under the skilled hands of Captain Sam Hitchcock and Captain Elmer 'Doc' Wheadon.

Its wartime service took a dramatic turn on December 20, 1942, during a navigation and training exercise,



Judy Pay stands in front of her stunning P-40 at the Old Aeroplane Company hangar at Tyabb airport in Victoria, Australia. Photo Karl von Moller.

Built by Curtiss in Buffalo, New York, in 1941, Pee Wee, with its serial number 41-14112 and nose number 106, stands as a testament to aviation history. It's one of only 699 P40F models produced, boasting a Packard V-1650 Merlin engine, a deviation from the usual Allison V-1710-39 liquid-cooled V12 engine, and offering improved high-altitude performance.

Pee Wee's journey began with the U.S. Army Air Corps,

when Pee Wee, along with three other P40s, encountered a severe storm front, forcing a crash landing on the island of Erromango – one of Vanuatu's southernmost islands. Though the aircraft were all written off after salvaging vital equipment, Pee Wee's story was far from over.

Fast forward to 1989, when Australians Robert Greinert, Ian Whitney, and Martin Mednis

(continued...)



2nd Lt. Cotesworth B. Head Jr. with Curtiss P-40F-1-CU 'Pee-Wee' Serial Number 41-14112 on Mt Santop, Erromango, Vanuatu. Photo Old Aeroplane Company.

salvaged Pee Wee and another P40F wreck. Judy Pay had her eye on these treasures, and upon their return to Australia, she acquired Pee Wee, commencing its restoration journey at her Tyabb base.



Pee Wee being recovered from Vanuatu in the mid-80's. Photo Old Aeroplane Company.

The restoration, a labour of love, involved rebuilding Pee Wee's fuselage in New Zealand by Pioneer Aero Restoration, followed by meticulous work on the tail, engine, and wings.



Lt. Ed Talbot with another of the crashed P-40F's with the serial number 41-14205.

After returning to Australia, Pee Wee emerged in its original colours, fully restored to its former glory.



Pee Wee undergoes an incredible transformation at the Old Aeroplane Company in Tyabb. Photo warbirdsonline.com.au

On April 22, 2009, after nearly two decades of restoration work, Pee Wee, took to the skies once more. The effort invested in restoring this rare aircraft was immense, but the joy of seeing it soar again made it all worthwhile.



Judy's P-40 in formation with (from the front), a CAC Boomerang, another P-40, a P-51 Mustang (top) and the famous Grey Nurse Spitfire (bottom).



The truly beautiful P-40 outside her home at Tyabb. And to think what she looked like when she first arrived here. Photo Karl von Moller.

Now, Pee Wee graces various air shows and displays across Australia, a testament to the passion and dedication of its restoration team and a privilege for all who witness its majestic flight.

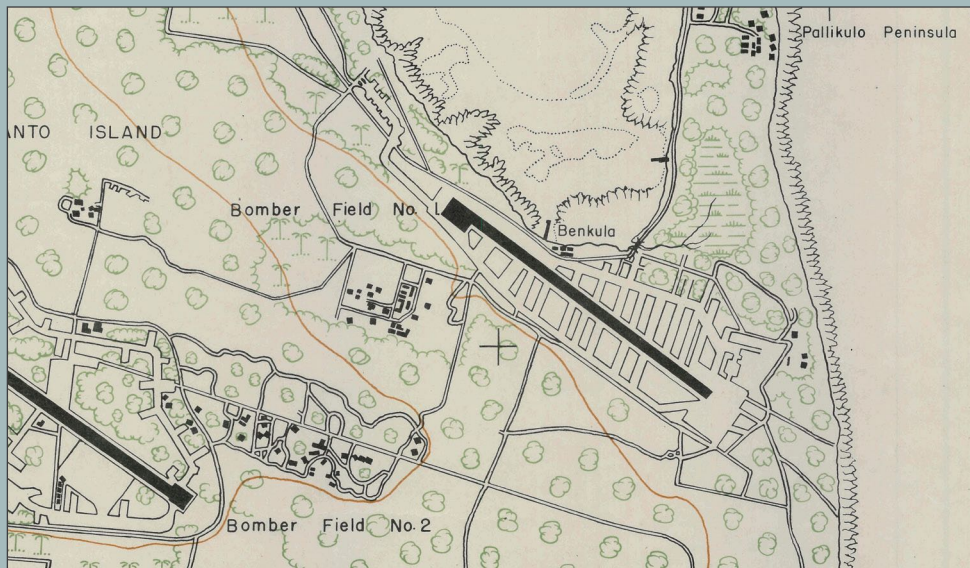
Base Button build-up

One compulsory acquisition at a time

Last month we brought you the story of Robbi Robertson, a landholder on Santo leading up to the arrival of American forces on the island in 1942.

This is the story of another landowner on Santo, M. Pascal Michel who owned the coconut plantation where Pallikulo Airfield or Bomber #1 was constructed.

The narrative begins on May 12, 1942, when Brigadier General William Rose, accompanied by Australian and American officers, arrived on Santo from Efate. Michel recalls their arrival, possibly in Navy Kingfishers. Mr. Thomas Harris, then manager of Burns-Philp (South Sea Co.) Espiritu Santo, and M. Michel accompanied the General and his group about the island in search of



A map of the Pallikulo area from April 1944 shows Pascal Micel's buildings along the coast, just to the north of the airfield.

An interview conducted with Michel on Aessi Island on May 29, 1945, sheds light on the early development of air facilities on Santo, as Michel had leased part of his plantation for the establishment of the airfield. With meticulous care, Michel recounts events from his own notes, offering a firsthand account of the unfolding events.

Having been the lessee of the Plantation, part of which became Pallikulo Airfield, and having been on the island since long before the arrival of the American armed forces, he was quite well acquainted with the general picture involving the early development of air facilities on the island. Much of the following he took from his own notes which he had scrupulously maintained, in as much as they involved items concerned with the leasing of his land to the American military.

suitable locations for an airfield. After looking over a number of locations they arrived in the Pallikulo area and visited the residence of M. Michel, located on the plantation known as Bencula (Benkula). This property had been leased by M. Michel from the owners, the Société Des Iles Du Pacifique, whose headquarters were in Noumea, New Caledonia.

On 1 May three officers, one Australian and two Americans

again contacted M. Michel in connection with "place belong plane" as he expresses it in his colourful



Burns Philp's Port Vila office were instrumental in assisting the Americans with acquiring the land they needed for the enormous Base Button.

"pidgin English" – locally known as Beche-de-Mer. Discrepancies in dates between Michel's recollections and those of Thomas Harris, are noted, highlighting the differing sources of information available.



The Segond Channel, also known as 'The Canal' after it had been established as a deepwater port with many anchorages and wharves. Photo US Archives.

By 28 May about 500 Army troops arrived at "The Canal". The Segond Channel between Aore Island and Espiritu Santo was known locally as "The Canal", marking the beginning of a significant military presence on the island for years to come.

On 1 July a contract was entered into, part of which represented M. Michel's interest in the Bencula Plantation. The United States Army and the French Co. (Société Des Iles Du Pacifique) were the other parties involved. The lease covered 1700 hectares, which included 85 coconut and 67 cocoa trees. It also stipulated the monthly sums to be paid to the French Co. and M. Michel and the total maximum payment.



A plantation owners house on Santo similar to that of M. Pascal Michel at Pallikulo Bay.

However, as of May 29, 1945, Michel claims to have received no payment for the lease or for the cattle supplied to the Army.

On 6 July 1942, four officers informed Michel they had come to build the "place belong plane" (Airstrip), three

of whom he believes were Lt. Elliott (Army), Major Boyer (Army) and Lt. Mathis (Navy CBs). They informed him they would cut out nine lines of coconut trees (30 feet between trees). On 7 July the Officers with M. Michel and three of his natives began to mark off the area thought best for the initial air strip and continued the next day also.

"One big ship come Pallikulo Bay July 8" is the way he expressed the arrival of equipment, which he believes included three bulldozers. He told Commander Carter, Port Director, the best spot to start unloading.



Bomber #1 on M. Pascal Michel's coconut plantation beside Pallikulo Bay. Photo US Archives.

M. Michel and his three natives were still marking out the limits on 9 July, on which date they began cutting down coconut trees. On the following day Dr. Masal, the French Delegate, visited the plantation to instruct Michel to leave the premises and that he would be paid in cash for his crops and any damage done.

On 19 July at Lt. Silverman, Advocate asked M. Michel if he would leave plantation till the war was over. Dr. Masal was present, and WM. Michel said that 497,000 francs was the offer made. A contract was accordingly drawn up at Noumea. On 2 September 1942, while asleep in his plantation house about 21,00, M. Michel tells of Marines visiting him and requesting him to vacate the premises. He there upon drove over to see General Rose, who issued an order that he might remain. On 8 September he moved in with his brother-in-law, Ki Lonay. On 28 July he was under the impression that three planes landed on the field – the first to use Pallikulo.

(continued...)



A B-17 Flying Fortress, lands at Bomber #1 Airfield not long after it was completed. Photo US Archives.

About one week later he believes seven Fortresses landed. These began continuous missions to the Solomons. Crews and pilots are said to have slept under the wings of the planes while ground crews re-fuelled and serviced them for the next day's flights. He reports gun fire could be heard here from the Battle of Santa Cruz, thus indicating how close the Japanese Navy approached the area.

He also notes that a few hundred natives assisted in constructing the field but that they were poor workers, being more interested in disposing of trinkets and selling souvenirs.

M. Michel was reported to be somewhat bitter about what he believes to be a "rotten deal" in connection with the lease arrangements over the Bencula Plantation property and that he has received no remuneration for lost crops, and bullocks supplied to the Armed Forces. He nevertheless was very cooperative in continuing to manifest his generosity to certain units, especially ABSD-1, Air Centre and other aviation activities.

He most generously loaned his workers to assist in obtaining turtles, fish, lobster and cattle for numerous units; escorted parties to neighbouring islands to

act as guide and interpreter; and brought back fruit, vegetables, shells and souvenirs from his plantation.

In reflecting on Michel's cooperation, an American archival report acknowledges the reciprocity involved, but praises Michel's genuine and whole-hearted commitment, contrasting it favourably with the actions of his countrymen.

This sentiment encapsulates the complex dynamics of wartime collaboration and underscores Michel's enduring impact on the military presence in Santo.



An aerial photograph of Bomber #1 looking south east. Photo US Archives.

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

When the Marine Corps invaded New Zealand

Like our project, there are many grassroots historical groups that are keeping alive the fantastic stories and memories of the dramatic years of the Pacific War.

One of those is the Kapiti US Marines Trust in New Zealand.

Kapiti is a coastal strip on the west coast of the lower North Island; once a rugged stretch punctuated by small villages and towns, it's now one of the fastest growing regions in the country.



Marines line up on the docks of an Allied Pacific Base after an uneventful journey from Guadalcanal. January 28, 1943. Photo courtesy of the Norm Hatch Collection – marinesnz.com

But that's not the first influx the area has seen, because in 1942 tens of thousands of US marines and support personnel descended. The friendly invasion, as it was dubbed, saw giant camps built along stretches of sandy beaches, as well as in various parts of the nearby capital, Wellington.

The Kapiti Trust has now relaunched its website, marinesnz.com, to mark the many ways the presence of the Marines is being remembered. It has some excellent resources and links.

The US personnel were largely drawn from the 2nd Marine Division, and fought both at Guadalcanal, and then perhaps most famously, in storming the tiny atoll of Tarawa in November 1943. (continued...)

Besides providing plenty of beaches for simulating stormy landings and unloadings, the wider region became a home away from home for the servicemen



Members of 1st Battallion, 10th Marines, bringing artillery ashore. Photo courtesy of the Norm Hatch Collection – marinesnz.com

and women. Many war brides resulted, and the Americans as always brought a hint of glamour and wealth to wartime New Zealand.

Among those to come were the future author Leon Uris, who would one day write Exodus. But his first book, Battle Cry, included his experiences in New Zealand, where the visitors struggled with local Maori placenames and other oddities.



America's First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt stops at the Red Cross Club and speaks to the dancers, August 29, 1943. Photo courtesy of the Norm Hatch Collection – marinesnz.com

Other Marine troops, the 3rd Division, would be based later around the largest city, Auckland, in the upper North Island.

One of the most remarkable resources to come to light, and only recently, about the Marines time



A fun party at the Allied Service Club in Wellington New Zealand, where the Marines did the serving and then the dishwashing. Here a Marine is serving two women volunteers with saveloys - New Zeland's equivalent to America's hot-dog. Photo courtesy of the Norm Hatch Collection – marinesnz.com

in New Zealand is the Norm Hatch film collection. Hatch would go on to shoot remarkable footage on the frontlines at Tarawa, which was turned into a documentary that later won an Oscar.



Camp McKay, home of the Second Marine Reg., boasts two large recreation halls for regimental and company dances. 1 October, 1943. Photo courtesy of the Norm Hatch Collection – marinesnz.com



Norman T. Hatch. Photo courtesy of marinesnz.com and USMCCA Online.

A largely chance encounter between him and a New Zealand film producer suggested that there existed much more footage, this time of the Marines before they went into combat. And so it proved, with the film now safely preserved in archive form and easily viewed by the public. The footage was shot for a film for US domestic consumption but in the end, it was never produced.

Instead it remains a fascinating time capsule of when the Yanks came to town.

Here's a little taster video:

<https://www.marinesnz.com/collections/norm-hatch-collection/videos>

So we suggest you check out the Kapiti website to learn more, especially if somewhere in your family lineage, there exists a Kiwi connection or two.



Marines depart New Zealand on 30 October 1943 on one of 16 ships that would take them to Tarawa - today's Kiribati. Photo courtesy of the Norm Hatch Collection – marinesnz.com

Quick fix - Santo's 29th Air Service Group



A B-17 Flying Fortress is given a new tail by crews of the 29th Air Service Group on Santo.
Photo US Archives.

As we've reported in past issues of our newsletter, Base Button on Santo stood out for its immense size and the multitude of military units operating on the island between 1942 and 1945. A recent discovery of photographs in the US Archives by our Project Manager Jimmy Carter has brought to light another intriguing unit, the 29th Air Service Group.

During World War II, the 29th Air Service Group, part of the United States Army Air Forces, played a crucial role in the Central Pacific Area. They provided logistical and maintenance support for aircraft in the Pacific Theatre, including maintaining and repairing aircraft, as well as providing transportation, communications, and supply services. Their efforts were essential for keeping aircraft operational, which in turn was vital for the success of air operations in the region.

Activated on January 15, 1941, as the 29th Air Base Group before being redesignated, the 29th Air Service Group, it was created, organised, and trained to provide vital services to Army Air Force units under any conditions anywhere it was deployed.

Despite facing challenges such as a lack of proper

equipment and supplies, particularly in the jungles of the South Pacific Islands, the dedication, loyalty, and perseverance of the 29th personnel made them one of the best service units in the theatre.

From its creation in December 1940 to its activation at MacDill Field, Tampa, Florida, on January 15, 1941, the group organised, trained, and performed every possible function in support of combat fighter and bomb groups in both defensive and offensive missions.

The 29th group grew from a small, select group into a complete service machine that carried out duties in various fields, including aircraft repair, maintenance, supply, ordnance, signal, quartermaster, transportation, medical, finance, photo, chemical, and administration.



The troop ship Mormacsea that carried the 29th from San Francisco to Espiritu Santo. Photo Australian War Memorial.

On November 3, 1942, sixty officers, three warrant officers, and one thousand, sixty-seven enlisted men sailed out of San Francisco Bay aboard the troop ship Mormacsea. A few days later the cargo ship Thomas A. Edison left the same bay, loaded with some of the bulkier equipment belonging to 29th units. (continued..)



29th Air Service Group ground crew repair the tail section of a Consolidated Liberator bomber. Photo US Archives.

After setting up operations at Espiritu Santo on November 26, 1942, with a short stop at the Fiji Islands, the 29th served and performed its assignments until the end of the Japanese war in August of 1945.

Many of its men remained overseas until the closing months of that year, prior to being relieved from World War II active duty. It was one of the longest periods of time served, without interruption in operations, by any organisation of US armed forces in the Pacific war zone.

A common misconception about World War II is that the US Armed Forces had thousands of fighting planes available to them. In reality, when the 29th group arrived at Santo, the US Army Air Force had only two heavy bomb groups, the 5th and the 11th, flying B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft, totalling less than one hundred serviceable bombers in the entire area.



Repairing the skin of a Liberator bomber without a hangar full of the latest tools, spares and gear. Photo US Archives.

Additionally, several fighter squadrons flew independently, with no centralised command, out of what was then the New Hebrides, and two were flying out of Guadalcanal.

Almost a year later, when Major General Nathan F. Twining, the Commanding General, 13th Air Force, commander COMAIRSOLS, was headquartered at Guadalcanal, he could count on only three hundred seventeen Air Corps, Navy, and Marine Corps bombers, plus three hundred fourteen fighters for the strategically important Munda, Bougainville, and Northern Solomons campaigns.

Because of the small number of available aircraft, it was imperative that every plane be kept airborne, i.e., crippled by enemy guns, take-off or landing damage, or just worn out from repeated and extended use. This became the principal mission of the 29th Air Service Group, and this the 29th did, using every method known to man, and some never attempted before.



A Bell P-39 Airacobra and a Consolidated B-24 Liberator are serviced by 29th ground crews on Santo. Photo US Archives.

They would machine their own parts in the absence of parts being available; they sealed holes in fuselages and wings with anything made of metal, and, in extreme cases, even mashed large tin food containers to repair fuselage areas.

By the end of 1945, all personnel of the original 29th had been returned to the United States. The group lived on and eventually moved to the Japanese mainland to serve the needs of the 5th Air Force, a duty that lasted until 1949.

Upon release from foreign duty, it returned to the States and was reassigned to provide air base services for the San Bernardino, California Air Materiel Area until 1951.

Inspiring everyday heroes

International Women's Day in early March showcased inspiring stories of Ni-Vanuatu women, including Florence Leah Lowonbu, a driving force at the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC).

Originally from Efate Island with roots in Ifira and Ambrym Islands, Florence, a 30-year-old mother, found her passion for journalism in 2015 through a VIT course.



Florence Leah Lowonbu in the Radio Vanuatu studio. Photo Vanuatu Daily Post.

This led to a Diploma in Media and Communications and a successful journey in Vanuatu media.

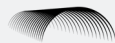
Starting as an intern in 2017, Florence joined VBTC's reform program in 2018, accumulating over 6 years of experience. Despite industry challenges, she remains dedicated, valuing journalism for its service to the community. She credits VBTC's support, especially during sensitive stories, and external allies for their backing.

Currently pursuing a Bachelor of Communications and Journalism at Griffith University, Australia, as an Australia Awards student, Florence aims to return to VBTC after her studies. She also contributes to the ABC Wantok Program, writing Bislama news articles to amplify Ni-Vanuatu voices.

Florence's journey underscores resilience, determination, and a commitment to serving her community through media, advocating for embracing challenges as opportunities for growth, and emphasizing dedication, service, and continuous learning.

And that's why she's this month's 'inspiring everyday hero'.

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



**SOUTH PACIFIC WWII
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