

Project USS Strong gives back

After the recent dedication of the USS Strong memorial at the museum, the energetic Tammi Johnson from Project USS Strong reached out to members, inviting them to contribute towards a new computer for the museum.

Thanks to the generosity of Cindy Deering, Ross Brennan, Christine Mitchell, main contributor Andy Hoder, and of course, Tammi, they managed to raise enough funds for our new research computer. This addition marks a major step

forward, allowing guests to delve deeper into the history of Base Button.

We are incredibly grateful to Tammi and the Project USS Strong families and members for their support. Small contributions like this play a big role in enhancing the museum's resources. Our heartfelt thanks go to all the Project USS Strong donors for making this much-needed museum equipment possible.



Marina Moli from the South Pacific WWII Museum and a cruise ship visitor share the fun of learning about Santo's incredible wartime history on our new research computer.

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Memorial site gets makeover

On October 26, Santo observed the 82nd anniversary of the sinking of the SS President Coolidge.

In preparation, the South Pacific WWII Museum arranged for the Elwood J Euart memorial site to be tidied up and the memorial given a fresh coat of paint.



The Elwood J Euart memorial on Santo looks wonderful following a clean in preparation for the 26 October commemoration. Photo – Mayumi Green.

John Tabi from Pacific Dive, along with his family, did an outstanding job with the initial clearing, and we extend our gratitude to John for his hard work.

A ceremony was held at the memorial, with many locals and members of the dive community in attendance, paying tribute to Captain Elwood J Euart, who heroically sacrificed his life to save several of his men from the sinking ship.

Special thanks to Oska from Allan Power Dive Tours for his brilliant painting efforts and for their contributions to today's event and to Mayumi Green for her photos.

Going forward, Pacific Dive, Allan Power Dive Tours, and Aore Adventure Sports and Lodge have generously offered to share the responsibility of maintaining the memorial site, encouraging more tourists to visit this important location on Santo.



New plants will be included around the memorial during the growing season to really make the area special. Photo – Mayumi Green.



A wreath is laid to recognise the sacrifice made by Captain Elwood J. Euart who rescued soldiers from the ship. Photo – Mayumi Green.

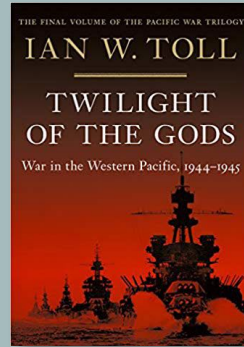
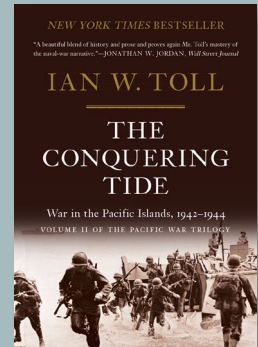
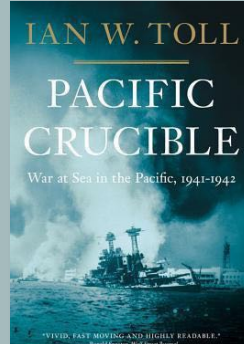


Lyn, Marina and Lemy from the South Pacific WWII Museum following the commemoration ceremony. Photo – Mayumi Green.

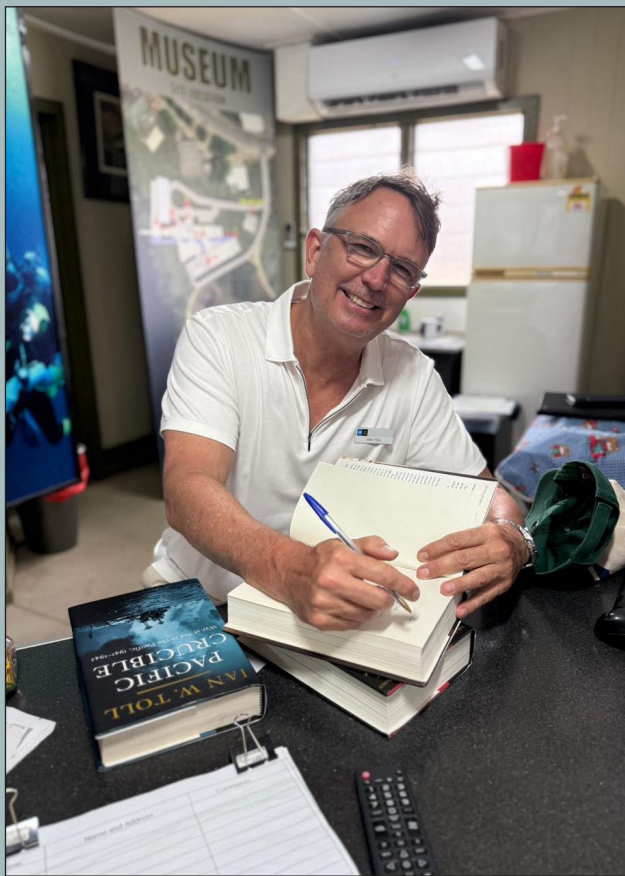
Good things come in threes

During the month we were lucky enough to have the National Geographic ship *MV Orion* make port in Santo.

On board was award-winning American author and military historian, Ian W. Toll. He visited us around a year ago and said to our museum manager Marina, that he would donate copies of his trilogy of books on the Pacific War to the Museum, when he returned at a later date.



The three volume set written by Ian about the Pacific War.



Author and historian Ian Toll signs his trilogy of books in preparation for donating them to the museum.

Good to his word he dropped by with other guests from the luxury exploration ship and donated signed copies of his three-volume history of the war in the Pacific.

A big thank you to Ian from the South Pacific WWII Museum.



The National Geographic ship *MV Orion*.



Marina gratefully accepts copies of Ian's new Pacific War trilogy to add to the museum's ever-growing library.

Welcome Lemy to the Museum

We now have a new Board Member and volunteer working at the South Pacific WWII Museum.

Raymond Lemy Nacisse (Lemy to everyone), is a well-known and outgoing figure within the Ni-Vanuatu community. He's joined us as a Board Member and works part-time at the Museum, where he brings a wealth of experience gained through his extensive career in volunteering and teaching.



Lemy hard at work getting acquainted with "the most comfortable chair in the world" at the South Pacific WWII Museum.

Lemy's journey began with his involvement in Up & Up Ministries, where since 2015 he has been organising and facilitating short-term overseas teams and assisting with both administrative and logistical tasks.

His earlier volunteer work includes various roles with Youth With a Mission (YWAM) in Australia, Vanuatu, USA and Mexico, spanning from 2008 to 2015. During this time, Lemy mentored students, led small teams on mission trips, managed operational functions such as

ground maintenance, and even took on the leadership of YWAM's transportation department in Mexico. His passion for helping others also extended to building homes for Mexican families.

Before his time with YWAM, Lemy gained hospitality experience working as a concierge at Le Lagon Resort in Port Vila, and earlier still - from 2000 to 2004 - he taught at Jehovah-Jireh School in Vanuatu, overseeing students' education and applying the Accelerated Christian Education curriculum.

Lemy has completed multiple training programs, including a 9-month intensive Bible course in Taiwan, leadership studies in Australia, and a Discipleship Training School in Mexico, where he learned skills related to organisational operations, leadership, and conflict resolution. His diverse experiences have equipped him with a unique blend of practical,



Lemy hard at work building a home in Mexico some years ago.

spiritual, and leadership skills, making him a valued member of any team he joins.

We're very lucky to have Lemy join the team at the Museum and he will no doubt take some of the pressure off our ever-enthusiastic Museum manager Marina.

Dive, dive, dive

With so many squadrons based on Santo or passing through the area, it became a natural choice for an Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) Training Unit.

Following an order from Commander in Chief Pacific (CinCPac), Santo was selected as the site for the ASW unit under Command South Pacific (ComSoPac),



An SBD aircraft takes part in bombing practice near Turtle Bay Airfield. Photo – US Archives.

managed by Air Centre Command. With ample air installations, nearby operating areas, and even a dedicated training submarine, Santo provided the ideal setting for comprehensive ASW training.



A B-25 Mitchell practices low-level skip bombing in one of the target areas around Santo. Photo – US Archives.

Personnel and materials were quickly assembled, allowing a wide-ranging program that included joint air-surface ASW training with Destroyer Command, as well as low-level bombing and rocket practice.

Command Fleet Air South Pacific set up bombing targets, which were given names like Yokohama,

Nagoya, and Tojo, that might be considered controversial today. These targets supported various training exercises, including live bombing, dummy masthead bombing, and strafing.

Occasionally, errors occurred, such as bombs mistakenly falling on Cape Quiros Radar Station. As training intensified, additional targets were

established, including areas where glide angles and deflection could be measured, with observation and communication stations set up for coordination.



US Navy Seabees 'weave' anti-submarine netting to be positioned across the Segond Channel. Photo – US Archives.

The construction of certain targets, particularly the forward-firing rocket range, was given top priority. SPATU (South Pacific Anti-Submarine Training Unit)

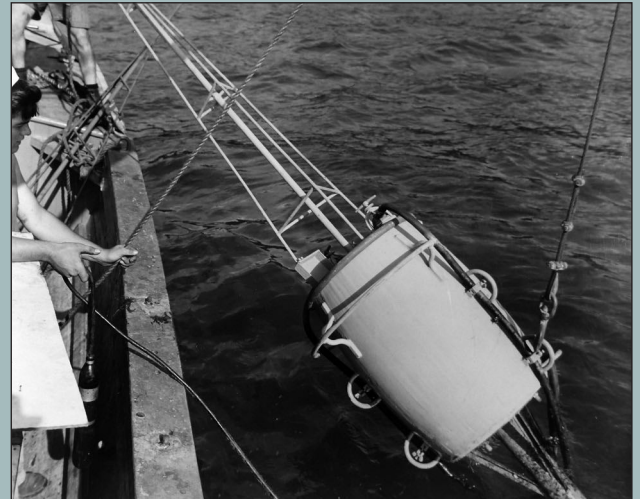
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A Leigh Light fitted under the wing of a Consolidated Liberator aircraft of the Royal Air Force Coastal Command, 26 February 1944. The 22 million candlepower light was also used by the US Navy in the Pacific. Photo – Imperial War Museum.

focused on training South Pacific squadrons, offering both refresher courses and new technology training for pilots and crews.

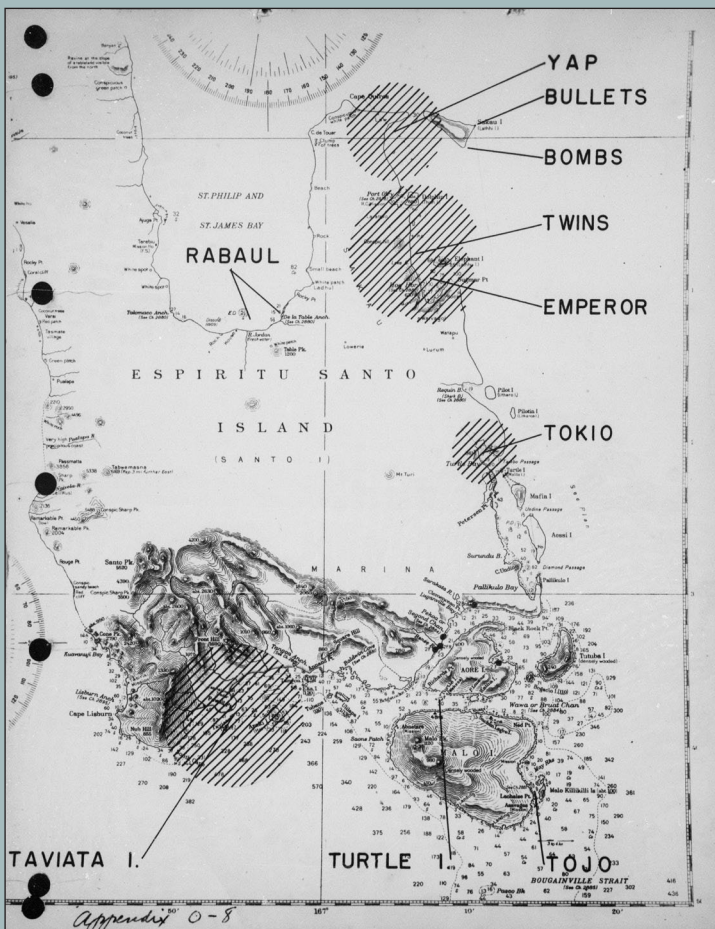
Commander Air Centre was responsible for supporting SPATU's establishment and engaged other units, such as the Photographic Laboratory, Utility Squadrons, and Ship Repair Unit, to assist with towing spar targets,



A sonar buoy being deployed to the waters around Havannah Harbour, off Efate. Photo - US Archives.

handling water rocket targets, and transporting personnel.

The extensive program also covered airborne searchlights, ground ASW training, rockets, depth bombs, and radio sonobuoys, playing a critical role in preparing forces for anti-submarine warfare in the wider Pacific region.



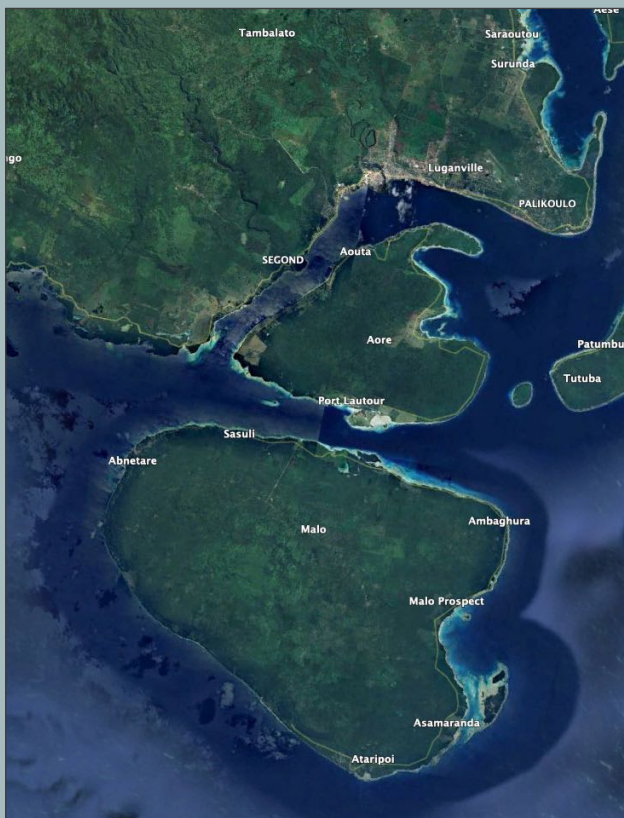
A map of the bombing targets on Espiritu Santo. Photo – US Archives.

Well said

Matt Wells became a well-known figure in the New Hebrides after his arrival in 1902.

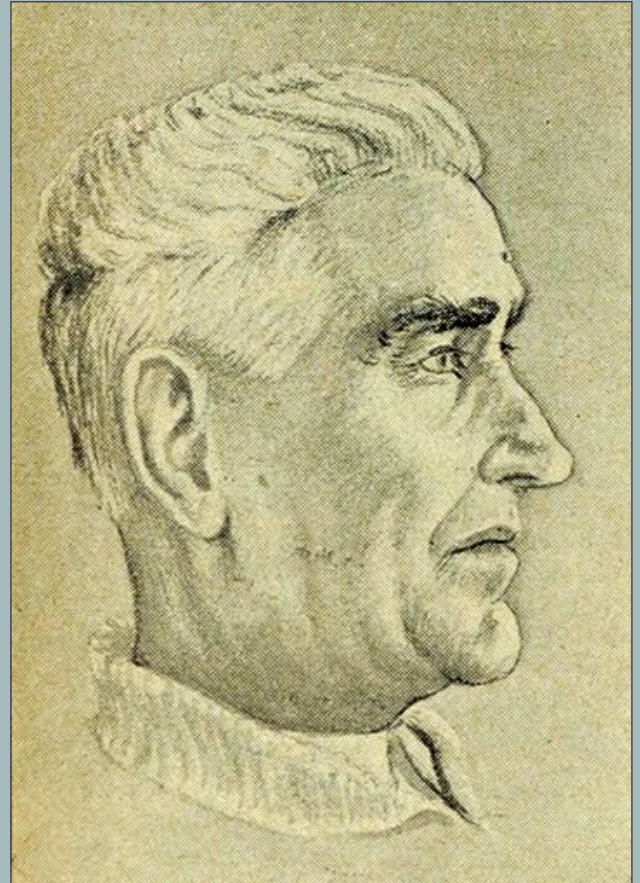
Born in Sydney in 1884, his family had roots in Northern Ireland, with a lineage tracing back to Scottish Highlanders. By the age of 16, the strong and resilient Mathew George Wells enlisted in the Boer War.

Upon his return, he moved to the New Hebrides and settled on Malo Island, near Santo. His copra plantation, *Sanawoa*, covered 1,100 acres (445 hectares), of which around 400 acres (160 hectares) were planted with coconuts, cocoa, and coffee.



A satellite photo of Malo, just south of Aore Island and Espiritu Santo.
Photo - Google Earth

In 1906, Matt's father, Samuel, and his older brother, Samuel Ezekiel, joined him. His brother established his own plantation, "Venui," at Baldwin Cove, which he operated until his death at 74. Matt's mother passed away shortly after his birth, and his father later remarried before passing in Sydney around 1926.



An illustration of Matt Wells from Pacific Islands Monthly January 1957.
Illustration - TROVE / National Library of Australia.

During his years on Malo, Matt Wells was known for his vocal criticism of the Condominium Government, established in 1907—a trait that seemed fitting given his Irish heritage. His robust health allowed him to appear much younger than his 65 years, though a stroke eventually sent him to Sydney for recovery.

He continued his convalescence on Norfolk Island, quickly regaining his strength, while his son John managed the plantation.

However, one of the more interesting documents we discovered in the US Archives, was a post war interview with Matt regarding the American occupation of Santo during World War II.

We thought we'd reproduce his interview and let him tell us about life during the war in his own words.

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"At daybreak in June 1942 the first task force of the American Invasion steamed into the Segond Canal at Espiritu Santo, and they commandeered all the available barges and punts etc. belonging to the French trading companies, and plantation owners residing along the Segond Canal.

It was indeed a hurry rush up job to land all the troops with their gear, arms, rations, trucks and machinery etc. before the Japanese got wind of what was happening at the south end of Santo.

The Americans worked night and day to accomplish this herculean task, and they had to land everything on punts and barges which were loaded alongside the ships anchored offshore, and towed ashore and



Soldiers do their best to turn the jungle on Santo into livable accommodation in 1942. Photo – US Archives.

beached, and unloaded by manpower only. At that time there were no piers or cranes to assist in the unloading of the punts, and as the rain pelted down on the Americans, they just had to keep going to accomplish the job in time.

When this was over the Americans had to erect their tents and build roads and attend to sanitary conditions and prepare drums to receive water for the troops, besides placing outposts equipped with radio and dozens of other things to attend to.

As time went on the big Liberty Cargo Ships began to arrive bringing with them the heavy machinery for road making and draining the swampy land adjacent to the camping grounds.

The Navy Seabees kept coming in thousands and when



In what is now Luganville, part of the incredible waterfront area of Base Button was staggering in its size. Photo – US Archives.

they got going, good roads took shape quickly, and piers were built to accommodate the large steamers, and where it took a couple of weeks to discharge the ships by punts landing cargo ashore, the piers facilitated matters quickly, until today the big ships were emptied on three or four days, and were ready to return to other ports.

From 1942 to 1944 the Americans worked ceaselessly around the clock seven days a week to build up Santo from practically virgin brush, until today it resembles a small city with modern equipment, roads, drains, electric light, sanitary arrangements, hospitals, radio stations, recreation grounds, huge refrigerators, store houses, machine shops of various kinds, and everything that is wanted to run such a big outfit.



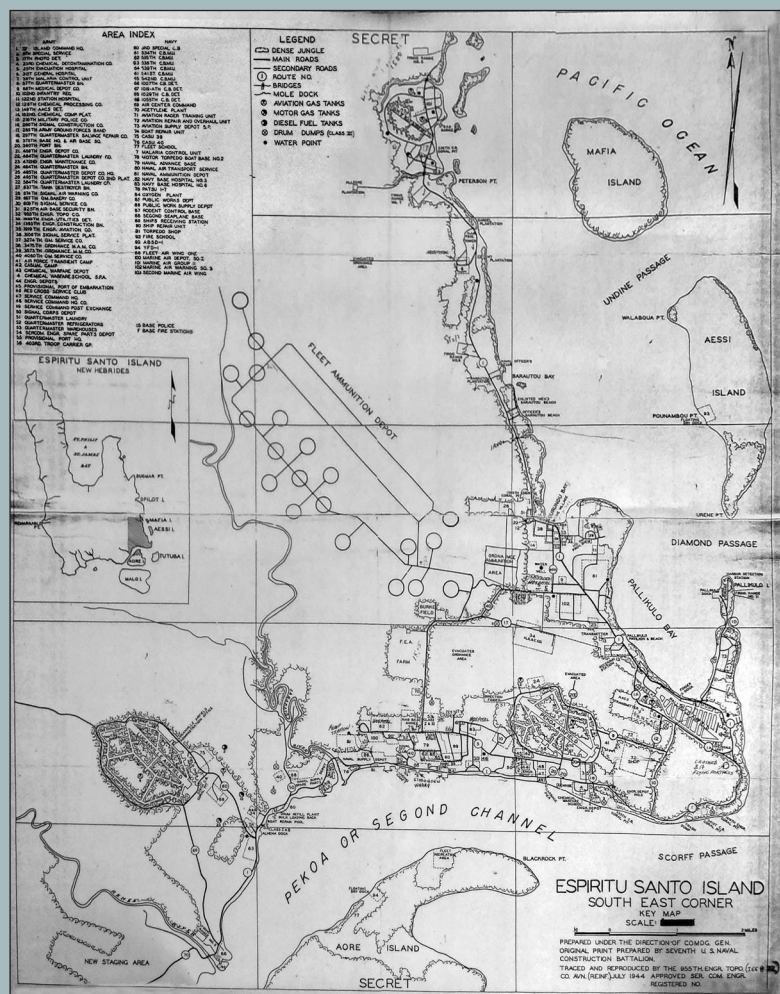
A rare colour photograph of the main wharf in what is now Luganville where the majority of Liberty ships were unloaded. Their cargo was then transported to some of the hundreds of Quonset huts and depots built all over the island.

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By 1944 Espiritu Santo had become the most efficient large supply base in the whole Pacific. Battle Fleets with ships of every size replenished at Espiritu Santo, and it became the busiest port during 1943 and 1944. At times I have counted over one hundred and fifty ships of all kinds lying at anchor ready to load and unload their cargoes. Over two hundred ships a month, merchant and warships were fuelled here from the largest tanks in the South Pacific.

There is no doubt that the men who built up the base at Santo deserve the highest praise, and a better result of teamwork would be hard to find anywhere on the fighting fronts."

What ultimately became of Matt remains uncertain. We haven't located any further information on him or his family. However, we do hope to find more information on him at a later date.



The transformation from a quiet South Pacific outpost to the largest military base in the South Pacific was staggering, as shown in this map. Map – US Archives.

An inconceivable accident

With Santo hosting a vast permanent and an even larger transient population during the war, it's unsurprising that Base Button experienced its fair share of accidents.



Pallikulo Airfield, also known as Bomber #1 on Pallikulo Bay.
Photo – US Archives

One of the most tragic incidents on Espiritu Santo's airfields occurred at 18:23 on Monday 12 April 1943, in the movie area at Pallikulo Airfield.

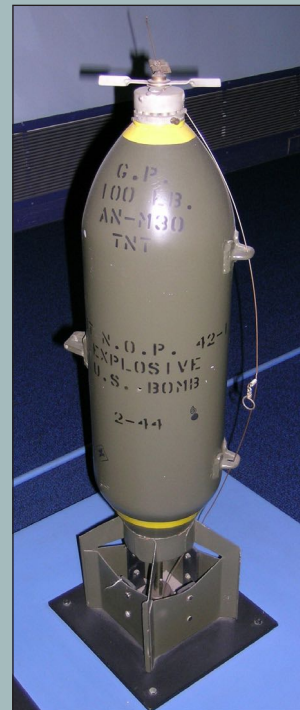
That evening, some men apparently used live bombs stored near the screen as seats while attending the movie. Unfortunately, one of those bombs detonated during the evening screening. The exact cause of the bomb's explosion remains unknown, but the detonation had devastating consequences.



A map of Bomber #1. The movie theatre was probably located in the Field Overhaul Unit at the east end of the airfield. Map – US Archives.

According to available records (Deck Logbook of Acorn (Red) Two from 15 January 1943, and an airmailgram from the CO of Acorn (Red) Two dated 3 June 1943), five men lost their lives, and 17 were sent to Base Hospital #3 for treatment.

The following day, a court of inquiry, led by Lt. Cmdr. J. H. P. Hughart, USNR, was convened to investigate the circumstances of the explosion. The findings, however,



A 100-pound World War II bomb similar to the one that exploded.
Photo – National Air & Space Museum.

were withheld and later destroyed during a "clean-up" process aimed at eliminating files with "historical significance" toward the war's end.

An Army report dated April 12, 1943, indicates that 12 men were killed and 23 injured, attributing the explosion to two sailors who had dragged a 100-pound bomb into the movie area to use as a seat.

No additional details on the incident have been located.



One of the many outdoor movie theatres on Base Button, similar to the one at Bomber #1. Photo – US Archives.

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

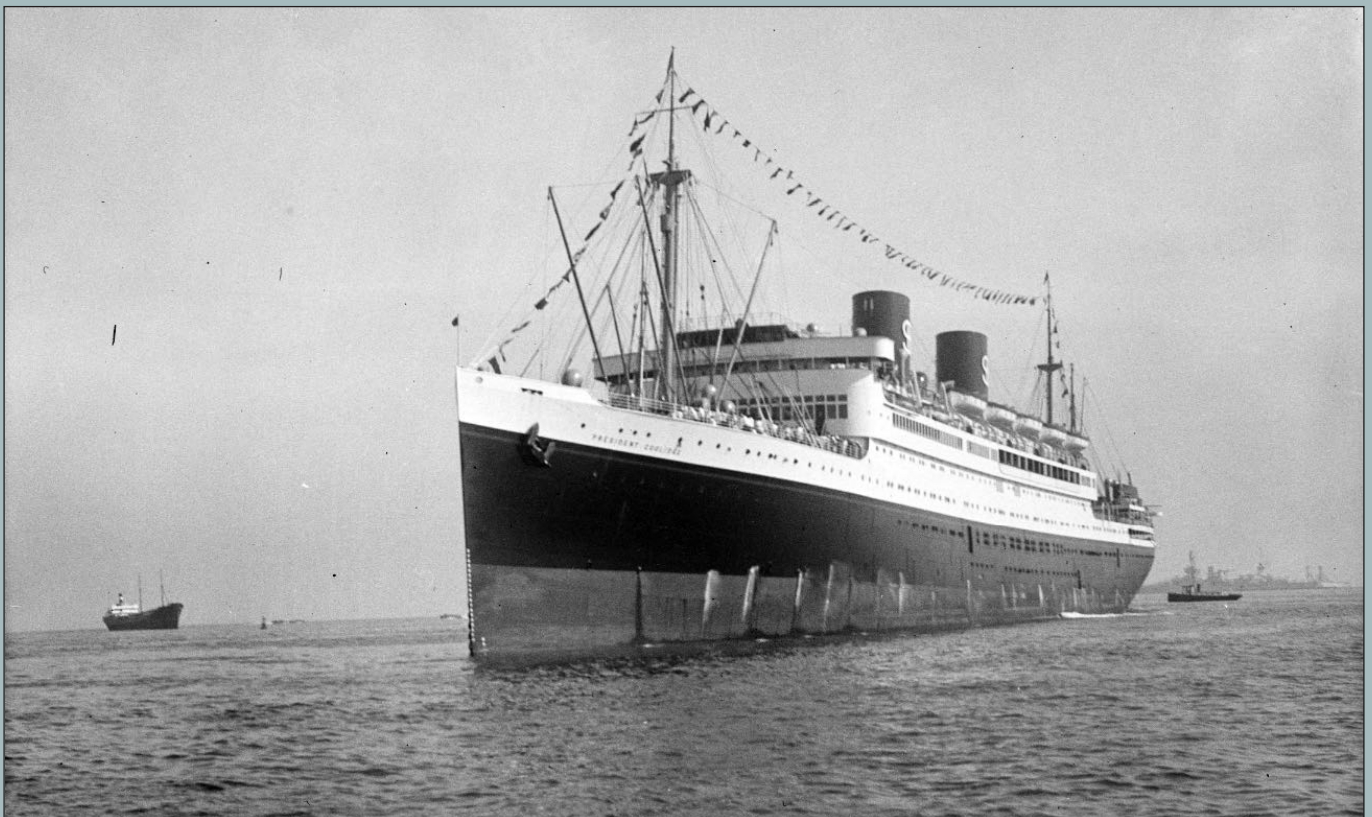
The SS President Coolidge

By contributing author Kevin McCarthy

You may think that everything related to the famous sinking of Espiritu Santo of the SS President Coolidge has been revealed.

Not so. Earlier this year the US National Archives publicised photos of the President Coolidge and the troops on her preparing for their ill-fated voyage.

The images here show the soldiers in their full kit and brings home the claustrophobic experience of those on board such a packed troop ship.



The SS President Coolidge comes in to dock in Los Angeles, date unknown.
Photo – Los Angeles Times Photographic Archives.

Just to recap, on October the 26th, 1942, the converted luxury liner, carrying five-thousand troops, sailed unwittingly into a US minefield. Fatally holed, the ship was beached a short distance from shore, and miraculously, almost all onboard survived.

While a far bigger loss of life was averted, their arms and heavy weapons, plus transport, sank to the sea floor when the liner eventually rolled and sank.

At this stage, the Battle for Guadalcanal was reaching its most climactic days, and the loss of the army

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regiment as an effective fighting force was a blow to the American campaign.

It appears however that the 172nd Infantry Regiment was not immediately destined to join the fight on Guadalcanal. That honour would fall to the 164th Regiment, which had earlier deployed through

The President Coolidge's final trans-Pacific passage began on Tuesday, October 6, 1942. At 1030 hours, she cast off from Pier 44 in San Francisco harbour and headed out to sea. On board were 340 ship's crew, 50 U.S. Navy sailors, and 4,800 passengers—all members of the U.S. Army. Their artillery pieces, jeeps,

trucks, camp equipment, and pallets of ammunition filled her cargo spaces. She also carried 519 pounds of quinine, the entire Pacific Theatre reserve supply of this anti-malaria treatment.

Most of the soldiers on her passenger manifest belonged to the 172nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT), 43rd Infantry Division. Commanded by Colonel James A. Lewis, this formation included the 172nd Infantry Regiment, 103rd Field Artillery Battalion, a medical company, some combat engineers, and other service-support detachments.

Also present, but kept segregated from the 172nd's troops, were 300 African American cannoneers serving with the



Members of the 172nd Infantry marching past the checking desk to board the SS President Coolidge. October 5, 1942. Photo - US Archives.

New Caledonia to Espiritu Santo, and was soon sent to support the embattled US Marines on the island. As the National Archive records:

The unit originally boarded the ship on October 5th in San Francisco, and immediately enjoyed the luxurious setting only an ocean liner could provide. Even if it meant the Continental Lounge was converted into stacks of soldiers' bunks.

And this article from the War History Network website details the force that was squeezed in a ship meant to carry fewer than 1000 passengers in luxurious style.



Troops of C Company, 172nd Infantry, point with their rifles at oriental cities they aim to reach before they complete the campaign for which they embarked aboard the SS President Coolidge at San Francisco Port of Embarkation. October 5, 1942. Photo - US Archives.

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2nd Battalion, 54th Coast Artillery Regiment. A World War I veteran named Colonel Dinsmore Alter led this contingent and, as the highest-ranking Army officer embarked, acted as commander of troops throughout the journey.



Surrounded by signs of the vessel's former glory, soldiers head for less luxurious quarters..
Photo – US Archives.

Looking at these images, it brings home how oppressive would have been the interior of the liner, and the vast amount of equipment just one soldier would carry.

It also underscores how miraculous it was that so many troops and crew were able to escape.

It otherwise would have become one of the greatest catastrophes ever seen at sea.



Soldiers stow away their gear and themselves in the former Continental Lounge, where the bunks are crammed five high. Photo – US Archives.

Inspiring everyday heroes

Drinking water that is safe and reliable is of course crucial for communities in Vanuatu.

Yet with so many islands, there is no way that many people will have access to reticulated water supplies.

That means in times of natural disaster, one of the priorities is to restore water supplies to a more permanent basis. People are adept at rebuilding homes where possible, and cultivating their land, but there's no quick fix for water.



Turning on the taps – the community has helped build and will maintain this new water supply. Photo – Australian High Commission, Vanuatu.

Pentecost was hammered in 2023 by three cyclones, but a new water supply system has now returned for around five-thousand people on Melsisi in central Pentecost.

It comes after support from Australia, under the Vanuatu-Australia Partnership, with funding of just over 300-thousand US dollars.

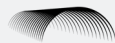
According to the Australian High Commission in Vanuatu, the system was built by a local company, employing local people and will be maintained by members of the community.



The new Water Supply System is officially launched by Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai and representatives from the Australian Government. Video still frame – VBTC News.

It is part of what Prime Minister Charlot Salwai describes as "building back better" after natural disasters.

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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