

**SOUTH PACIFIC WWII  
MUSEUM**  
VANUATU

# South Pacific WWII Museum

Subscriber's newsletter

[southpacificwwiimuseum.com](http://southpacificwwiimuseum.com)

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Guadalcanal. With a Christmas tree, wreaths, and tent decoration constructed from palm fronds, Christmas cards and package wrappings, these Marines brought the Christmas spirit into their tent. December 24th, 1944. Photo – US Archives. Colourisation – palette.fm

## Official Navara Sponsors





Hi Everyone,

As we bring this year to a close, I'd like to take a moment, on behalf of the Museum Board and myself, to extend a heartfelt thank you to all those who have contributed to making 2024 such a remarkable year for the museum. Your support, hard work, and dedication are what keep the museum thriving.

First, to our incredible museum staff—you are truly the face of our organisation. Marina, our Support Officer, has done an outstanding job welcoming visitors and school groups, answering countless questions, and ensuring the museum runs smoothly. Supporting her is Lyn, our Museum Assistant, whose efforts throughout the year have been invaluable.

We've also been fortunate to have the help of our new Board Member and volunteer, Lemy, who has stepped in to assist regularly in the museum, especially on cruise ship days. Thank you, Lemy, for your energy and dedication!

A special mention goes to Kevin McCarthy, our former VSA volunteer, who continues to lend his writing talents to the museum. Kevin's work on The Santonian newsletter, as well as the Month in Military History and Everyday Hero stories in our monthly newsletter, has been a highlight for our members. Thank you, Kevin, for keeping history alive with your captivating writing and storytelling.

This year also marked a significant milestone with the opening of our new exhibit area in January. This expansion was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Reserve Bank of Vanuatu and the New Zealand High Commission. Your contributions have transformed the museum, and we are deeply grateful.

This new space became even more meaningful when we had the honour of welcoming the USS Strong memorial to the museum. It's wonderful to have Project USS Strong as part of our extended museum family, and we owe special thanks to the ever-enthusiastic Tammi Johnson for her leadership in bringing this project to life. Thank you, Tammi, and everyone involved in this incredible initiative.

We also extend our gratitude to Leighton Shearer and the team at Santo Hardware for your continued support throughout the year. To our official Navara Sponsors, Tropex Exports and Henry Cumines, your generosity has been nothing short of extraordinary—thank you!

To our members, supporters, subscribers, and every visitor who has dropped something in the donation box—thank you for believing in our mission. To our donors, who entrust us with precious artifacts, photographs, and memorabilia, you play a crucial role in preserving the history of the Pacific, and we're so thankful for your contributions.

Finally, to those anonymous supporters who work quietly behind the scenes—your efforts have not gone unnoticed. You know who you are, and we deeply appreciate everything you do for us.

Thank you for making 2024 such an incredible year.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Jimmy".

Jimmy.



An unknown Marine corporal carries a Christmas care package from home on a base somewhere in the Pacific. Photo – US Archives. Colourisation – palette.fm



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December 20, 2024

Dear Friends,

As 2024 draws to a close, I want to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude for your unwavering support of the South Pacific WWII Museum. This year has been a remarkable chapter in our shared journey to honour and preserve the history of the South Pacific during World War II.

Thanks to your generosity and passion, we've seen incredible progress throughout the year. Our new exhibit space has allowed us to showcase more of our growing collection of artifacts, photographs, and personal stories. Each piece helps us tell the powerful stories of courage and sacrifice from that pivotal time. It's been inspiring to see visitors engage with these exhibits and share their own connections to history.

The museum continues to be a beacon of community spirit. This year, we've hosted engaging events, welcomed veterans and their families, and connected with visitors from around the world who share a deep appreciation for the history we work to preserve. It's your support—whether through donations, memberships, or simply spreading the word about our mission—that makes all of this possible.

Looking ahead to 2025, we are excited about the opportunities that lie before us. We're working diligently to bring new exhibits and programs to life, and we continue to explore partnerships that will elevate the museum's impact even further. None of this would be achievable without the dedication of people like you, who believe in our vision.

As we close out this year, please know how much we value your role in this journey. Together, we are ensuring that the stories of the South Pacific during World War II are never forgotten and continue to inspire future generations.

Wishing you a joyous holiday season and a bright start to the New Year!

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bradley Wood".

**Bradley Wood**  
Chairman

# International aid to Port Vila

Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, was struck by a powerful earthquake last week, leaving residents reeling and emergency services scrambling to respond. The magnitude 6.8 quake hit on Tuesday afternoon at 12:47 pm local time, with its epicentre located approximately 30 kilometres southwest of the city and at a depth of 10 kilometres.



The Billabong building in downtown Port Vila became the centre of the relief effort with many people trapped alive under the building. Photo – Various sources.

The tremor caused widespread damage across the city, toppling buildings, cracking roads, and cutting off power and water supplies to many areas.



Damage to buildings and infrastructure in the capital Port Vila and surrounding areas was extensive. Power was out, water unavailable and all important communications were down. Photo – Various sources.

## Immediate Impact

The earthquake was felt strongly throughout the island of Efate, triggering panic as residents fled their homes and businesses. In the aftermath, several buildings in Port Vila were reduced to rubble, trapping dozens of people under collapsed structures. Hospitals reported

a surge in patients with injuries ranging from minor cuts to serious trauma.

Schools, offices, and government buildings were evacuated as aftershocks continued to rattle the region throughout the day. Authorities issued warnings to avoid damaged buildings and to stay alert for further seismic activity.

## Rescue Operations

Emergency response crews, including local authorities, international aid organisations, and Vanuatu's ProMedical and ProRescue teams, worked tirelessly to locate and rescue those trapped beneath the rubble.



Members of the Vanuatu ProRescue team work around the clock to free survivors from under the Billabong building. Photo – Various sources.

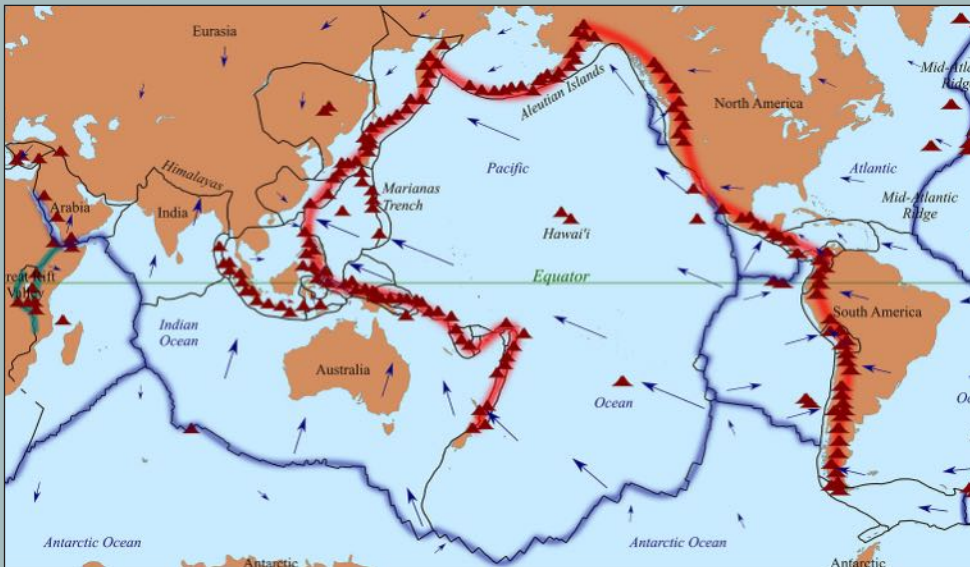
Equipped with limited heavy machinery and relying heavily on manual labour, rescuers faced significant challenges in accessing collapsed structures. (continued..)

Despite these obstacles, the teams demonstrated remarkable efficiency and coordination, pulling several survivors from the debris. Their efforts were bolstered by community volunteers who assisted in providing food, water, and shelter to displaced residents.

By Saturday, rescue operations had transitioned into recovery efforts as hopes of finding more survivors dwindled. Officials confirmed that at least 12 people lost their lives in the disaster, while more than 200 others were injured. Thousands have been left homeless, seeking refuge in temporary shelters set up in schools and churches.

### The Pacific Ring of Fire

Vanuatu's geographic location on the Pacific Ring of Fire, a horseshoe-shaped zone of high seismic and volcanic activity, makes the country particularly vulnerable to earthquakes and tsunamis. The Ring of Fire accounts for about 90% of the world's earthquakes and includes several tectonic plate boundaries.



The Pacific Ring of Fire is about 40,000 kilometers (24,900 miles) long and is where most of the world's earthquakes and volcanic events occur. The arrows indicate which direction the tectonic plates are moving. Graphic – STING | Wikimedia.

The islands of Vanuatu sit at the convergence of the Australian and Pacific tectonic plates, which frequently grind against each other, causing the ground to shake. This seismic activity, while a natural part of the region's geology, poses significant risks to the nation's infrastructure and population.

In 2023 alone, Vanuatu experienced multiple earthquakes, though most were minor compared to last week's event. The country's vulnerability is exacerbated by its location in a cyclone-prone region, further complicating disaster preparedness and recovery efforts.



A Royal Australian Air Force C-17 with members of Queensland Fire and Rescue, leave Brisbane on their way to Port Vila. Photo – Various sources.

### Government & International Response

In the wake of the earthquake, Vanuatu's government declared a state of emergency and appealed for international assistance. Neighbouring countries, including Australia and New Zealand, quickly pledged support, sending supplies, personnel, and financial aid to assist in relief efforts.

Humanitarian organisations such as the International Red Cross and UNICEF have also mobilised resources, distributing essential items

like clean water, food, and medical supplies to affected communities throughout the island.

Local engineers and those from Australia and New Zealand are assessing the structural integrity of key buildings, including hospitals and schools, to ensure they are safe for use.

(continued..)

Prime Minister Charlot Salwai addressed the nation, expressing condolences to the families of the victims and commending the resilience of Vanuatu's people. "This tragedy reminds us of the need for continued investment in disaster preparedness and infrastructure resilience," Kilman said.

## Looking Ahead

The earthquake has reignited discussions about the need for improved building codes and disaster readiness in Vanuatu. While the country has made strides in strengthening its emergency response capabilities, experts warn that more needs to be done to mitigate the impact of future natural disasters.



New buildings like this school on Pamma are being built to withstand natural disasters. Photo – CCECC.

For now, the focus remains on recovery and rebuilding. As residents of Port Vila begin the arduous task of restoring their lives, the resilience and solidarity displayed in the face of adversity continue to shine through.

## How to Help

Relief organisations are calling for donations to support recovery efforts in Vanuatu. Funds will be used to provide shelter, medical care, and essential supplies to those affected by the earthquake.

While last week's earthquake was a stark reminder of the risks inherent to life in the Pacific, it also highlighted the strength of a community that refuses to be broken by disaster.



A steel frame office building being built in Vanuatu. Modern construction techniques will help lessen the effects of natural disasters. Photo – Director Group DFX.

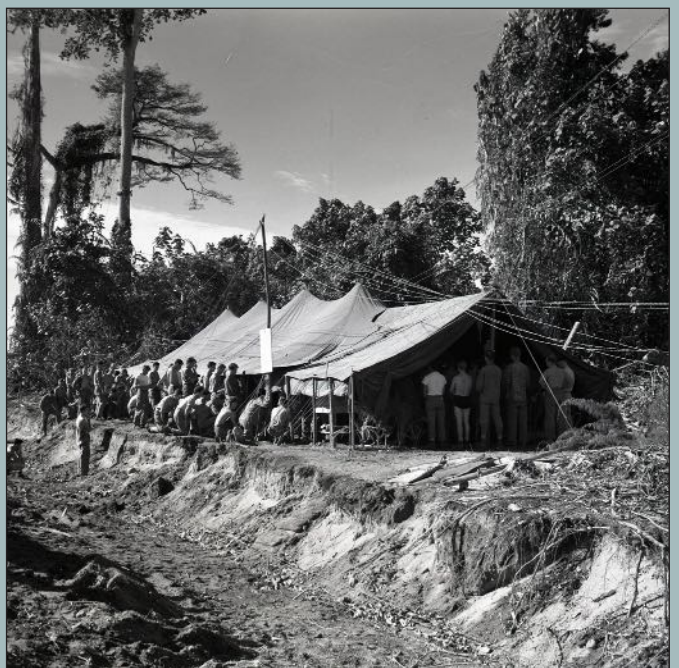
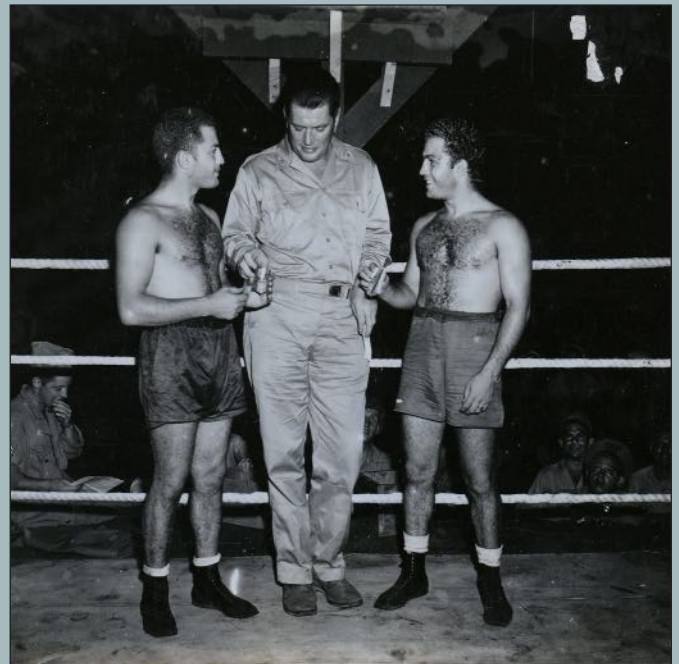


Part of the National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre, the Australian Medical Assistance Team (AUSMAT) can mobilise within 48 hours. Here they are providing assistance to the Vanuatu Ministry of Health. Photo – NCCTRC.

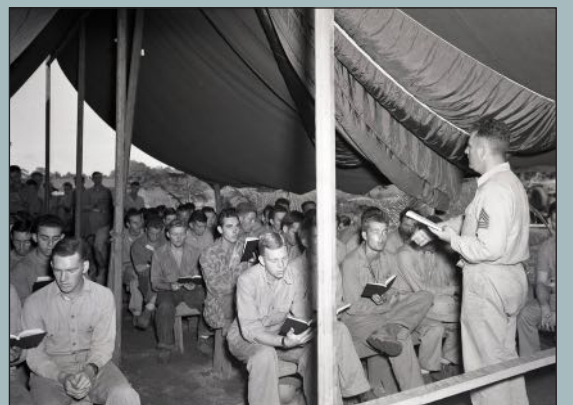
# Dreaming of home

With Christmas upon us, we thought we might see what photographs we could find that capture the spirit of Christmas in the Pacific during World War II.

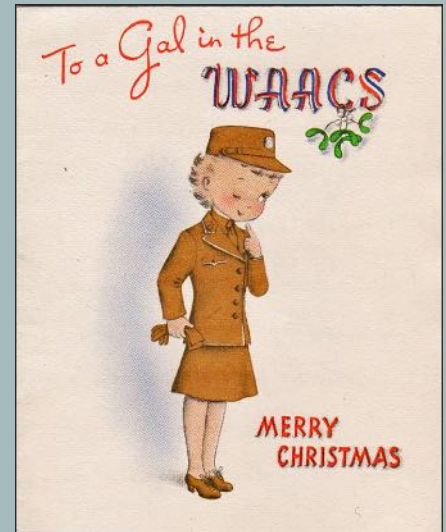
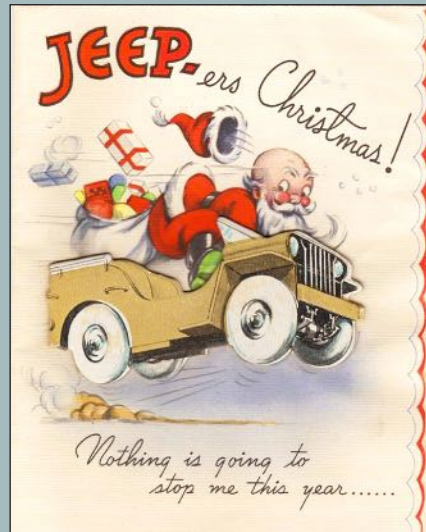
Thankfully the US Archives has a wonderful collection of festive photography taken throughout the Pacific. We also found a few images in the Australian War Memorial's collection that we'll share with you as well. The original captions are listed on page 8 .











Three Christmas cards that family back home could send to 'the boys and girls on the front line.'

All images courtesy US Archives, unless noted. The images on each page read top to bottom/left to right.

#### Page 5

Merry Christmas is the title of Chaplain Rabun's sermon as he delivers it to the men of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines while standing under the sign Merry Christmas made by the 1st Battalion Marines. Bougainville, 25 December 1943.

This youthful atoll dweller of Majuro Village Atoll, Marshall Islands is entertaining his guests with a dance or two. Directly behind the smiling performer is Captain Harold B. Grow (USNR), Atoll Commander of Majuro, 25 December 1944.

Three champs in the South Pacific Lt. Comdr. Gene Tunney (USNR) awards Pvt. Harvey Weiss (USMC, left) with the "Betty Grable" medal and Pvt. Morris Weiss (USMC, right) with the "Lana Turner" medal after they won their fights in the Armed Forces South Pacific Boxing Tournament. The Weiss boys are twin brothers and live in New York. Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 24 December 1943.

By the roadside, by the side of a jungle road at Empress Augusta Bay, Marines, sailors, and soldiers gather for Mass that fills the tent chapel to overflowing. Bougainville, 25 December 1943.

#### Page 6

The Christmas spirit was captured under the towering palms of this Advanced Naval Base at Majuro Atoll, Marshall Islands. Standing behind the illuminated Christmas tree is EM3/c Werner Braun (USNR), while kneeling is Rdm2/c Robert Farrell (USNR). 25 December 1944.

Christmas Day, Santa Claus arrives aboard the USS Enterprise (CV-6) in a dive bomber with six torpedo planes bearing names of his steeds, to distribute gifts. 5 December 1943.

Marines listening to Chaplain Westwood preaching in and outside of the Chapel on Christmas morning. Guadalcanal, 25 December 1943.

Marines on the eve of the invasion of Cape Gloucester, attend Christmas church services on a South Pacific island, 25-26 December 1943.

Merry Christmas!! That's the greeting that Air Group 6, temporarily based aboard the USS Enterprise (CV-6) during recent attacks on the Marshall and Gilbert Islands, sent their mother ship on Christmas Day. 25 December 1943.

Christmas morning and MT/Sgt. Frank K. Psaute, Bandmaster leads singing at Administration Section Chapel. Guadalcanal, 25 December 1943.

#### Page 7

Divine service on the USS Enterprise (CV-6) on Christmas Day. Catholic Midnight Mass, the chaplain is Rev. Felix Reitlingshofer, a Franciscan friar. 25 December 1943.

Christmas tree aboard the USS Takanis Bay (CVE089), 25 December 1944.

Following their Christmas Day dinner, officers and crew of USS Enterprise (CV-6) staged impromptu entertainment on the hangar deck, with everyone invited. Here the Air Officer, Comdr. Thomas J. Hamilton (USN) addresses the spectators and delivers the Yuletide greeting from Capt. Mathias B. Gardner. 25 December 1943.

Australian troops of the 9th Infantry Battalion enjoying a specially cooked festive meal on Bougainville Island, 25 December 1944. Photo – Australian War Memorial

Captain Frank Dudley Smith dressed as Santa Claus hands gifts to patients of the 2/6th Australian Field Ambulance Ramu Valley, New Guinea. Some of the men pictured from left to right are Corporal William Alexander Verney Smith, Corporal R Roessler and Warrant Officer 2 Bertram Keith Case. 25 December 1943. Photo – Australian War Memorial.

# Fuelling Guadalcanal's victory

Unearthing a new account of Base Button's history during World War II is always intriguing. Recently, notes surfaced from an interview with Lt. Col. Davin of the Finance Department, Army Service Command, who was stationed on Espiritu Santo.



Troops of the 172nd Infantry are preparing to embark on their Army transport that was once the SS President Coolidge. The original luxury fittings can be clearly seen. They are embarking at the San Francisco Port of Embarkation, California. 5 October 1942. Photo – US Archives.

Lt. Col. Davin was one of approximately 6,000 passengers aboard the Coolidge when it left the United States. Before arriving at Espiritu Santo, the ship had stopped at Noumea to disembark about 1,500 Seabees and their equipment.

Upon reaching Espiritu Santo, the Coolidge spent three hours steaming off the eastern entrance of Second Channel, apparently awaiting a pilot.

However, with reports of Japanese naval forces nearby in the Santa Cruz Islands and fears of a potential attack by submarines or aircraft, the captain decided to enter the mined passage.

This fateful decision took place on October 26, 1942, the same day as the Battle of Santa Cruz. The island was on high alert, with the outcome of the battle uncertain. Aboard the Coolidge were 4,500 troops, including officers, and a significant amount of combat

equipment intended for the 172nd Combat Team, who were to support the Guadalcanal Campaign.

Tragically, the Coolidge struck mines while entering Second Channel. Although the captain attempted to beach the vessel, the ship lost power and slid off the reef into deep water, sinking within an hour. While the loss of life was minimal, nearly all the crucial combat equipment was lost, severely delaying operations and costing lives in the Solomons Campaign.

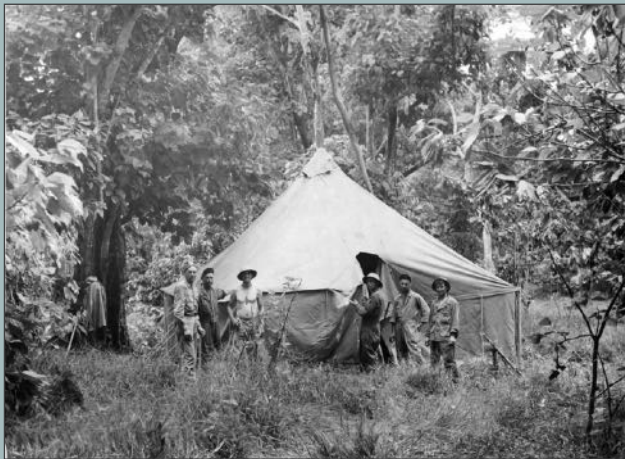
The survivors faced significant challenges, having lost most of their belongings. The Navy, Marines, and Seabees stationed



The Coolidge after it had hit the mines and had been run aground. Soldiers abandon ship just off the beach. Photo – US Archives.

(continued...)

on Espiritu Santo stepped in to provide shelter, food, and clothing. With limited resources, survivors wore a mix of uniforms—Army, Navy, and Marine—making it difficult to distinguish their service affiliations. Tents were quickly set up across the island to accommodate them, with the 57th Seabees at Surundu Bay playing a vital role in their recovery.



Tents like this one being erected by the 86th Combat Mapping Squadron, popped up everywhere on Santo to house the rescued soldiers from the Coolidge. Photo – US Archives.

Lt. Col. Davin also recalled the early construction of Espiritu Santo's airfields. Contrary to common belief, it wasn't the 810th Aviation Engineering Battalion that began this work. Instead, infantrymen, equipped with few tools and no machinery, completed the initial labour. In fact, hand tools were borrowed from local plantation owners, including machetes from M. Auguste Harbulot, "who was later reimbursed." The efforts were described as "pathetic" due to the scarcity



Pallikulo Field (Bomber #1), two years after completion. This shot was taken in 1944. Photo – US Archives.

of equipment, underscoring the tremendous manual labour involved.

The first aircraft landed on Pallikulo Field (Bomber #1) before construction was fully complete. Within six days, B-17s of the 11th Bombardment Group began operations, despite ongoing challenges. In fact, in July and August these planes were fuelled by hand from 5-gallon cans, and it is related that even General Rose assisted in re-fuelling.



A B-17 bomber lands at Bomber #1. Photo – US Archives.

Fuel shortages forced innovative methods—fuel was transported in jeeps over rough roads or floated ashore in drums, though this method often failed, with some barrels discovered months later as far as Pallikulo and Turtle Bay. The urgency extended to Guadalcanal, where aviation fuel was flown to Marines at Henderson Field in large drums.



A patient is loaded aboard a C-47 for the trip back to Santo. Photo – US Archives.

During this period, SCAT (South Pacific Combat Air Transport) played a critical role, using C-47 planes to ferry casualties from the Solomons back to Espiritu Santo and deliver urgently needed supplies like bombs, ammunition, and medical equipment.

(continued...)

According to Lt. Col. Davin, many of these planes were piloted by Marines. The evacuation process was harrowing; Japanese forces frequently fired on departing planes as they taxied for take-off. Some C-47s arrived in Santo riddled with bullet holes, having flown low over the sea for protection.

targeting airfields, supply depots, and troop positions in the Solomon Islands. They inflicted heavy damage, sinking four Japanese ships and damaging numerous others, while overcoming logistical challenges and undertaking hazardous, long-range missions.



A C-47 taking off from Turtle Bay airfield on Espiritu Santo, November 1943. Photo – US Archives.

Navy corpsmen tended to the wounded onboard, as no nurses were present at the time. Some casualties were later transferred to better-equipped facilities on Efate.



The 11th Bombardment Group squadron patch. Graphic – Wikipedia.

The 11th Bombardment Group earned battle honours for its exceptional service during this time. From July 31 to November 30, 1942, the group carried out continuous strikes against superior Japanese forces,



Caught on the ground at Henderson Field During the heavy Japanese shelling on the night of 13 October 1942, several B-17s of the 11th Bombardment Group were so damaged that they could not depart with the others for Espiritu Santo. Photo – JCFalkenbergIII.

# An eye for detail

Donald Garber, an American photographer, enlisted in the US Navy in November 1941. Though he had limited experience with a camera before joining, his natural artistic talent enabled him to capture breathtaking images, both on and off Espiritu Santo.



Don Garber in his navy uniform.

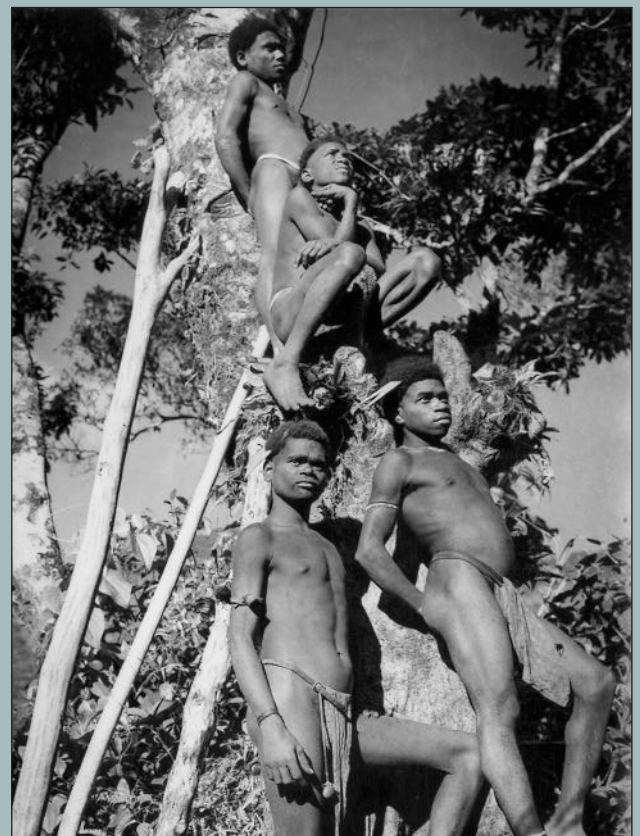
In early 2021, Don's daughter Leslie reached out to us and shared scanned copies of his remarkable collection.

While stationed on Espiritu Santo, Don documented key historical moments, military activities such as malaria containment efforts, and visits from prominent figures like First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

He also photographed bomb testing operations and captured the essence of life in local villages nestled in the mountains.

What sets Don's work apart is the beautiful composition, lighting, depth of focus, and ability to convey the mood of many of his photographs.

His unique perspective makes his photographs stand out from much of the imagery of that era.



One of the many shots Don took of local villagers somewhere on Santo.

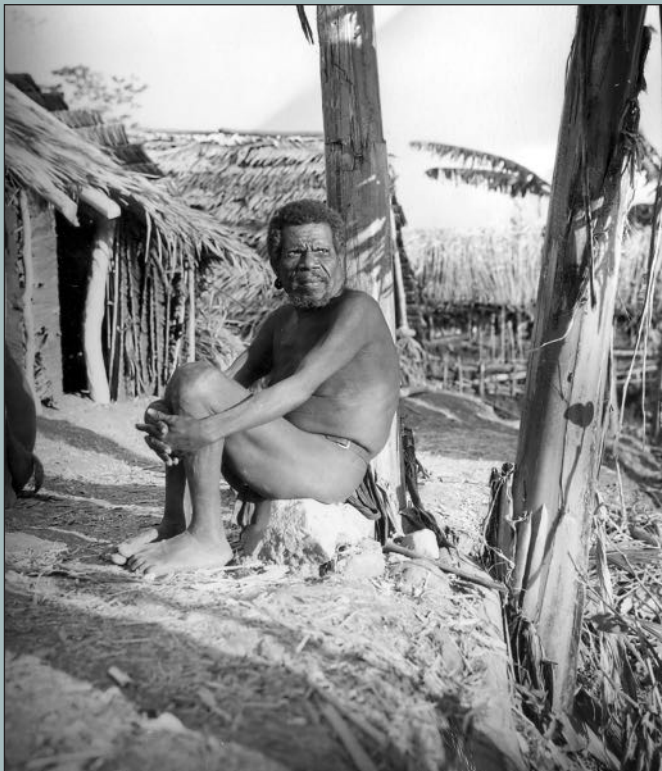
This month, Leslie made the heartfelt decision to send us the original images and artifacts from Don's collection.

The South Pacific WWII Museum is deeply grateful for her generous donation of these invaluable pieces of history.

We recognise the personal significance of this decision and are honoured to preserve and showcase Don's contributions.

These treasured artifacts will one day find a home in our new museum, which we hope to see completed in the near future.

(continued...)



Another of Don's shots of an unknown Ni-Vanuatu villager somewhere in the mountains of Santo.



Village women and children in the early 1940s on Santo.



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt poses with her flight crew on Santo. This was one destination of her incredible tour of the Pacific during WWII.



One of Don's official photographs of Admiral Nimitz on board the USS Saratoga.



The Air Centre Photo Lab staff who worked alongside Don on Santo.



Don even created his own Christmas cards.



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**THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY**


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# Operation Magic Carpet

*Or Home Alive by Christmas 45*

Espiritu Santo famously has its Million Dollar Point – where the departing US military disposed of unwanted military equipment by simply driving it into the sea.

The mathematics of doing so may look crazy – but not when you take into account the cost and time and sheer effort needed to move it back to the US. Far easier to write it off, and build the next generation of weapons and tools.

The United States knew this to be so, because it had already spent over a year just moving servicemen and women back home.



Soldiers are crammed into the giant below-deck hangars of the carrier Intrepid, now tasked with being a giant troop transport. Photo – The National Museum of Naval Aviation.

This was the famous Operation Magic Carpet – where hundreds of vessels – from mighty carriers to destroyers carried home their human cargoes.

*Home Alive by Christmas 45* was the slogan, but that could only be achieved for a fraction of overseas personnel.

Operation Magic Carpet began in September 1945 to bring the troops back home to the United States – and as Christmas approached, it even spawned a sub-operation, with the aim of rushing as many back home as possible.

(continued...)

It's calculated that a quarter of a million reached the US by Christmas Day – but were not quite where they called home. As Time magazine noted in a 2015 article, they faced the worst air, rail and car jams in history.



Troops returning from Europe take part in a lifeboat drill aboard Queen Mary in 1945. Photo –historycollection.com

As reported in the New York Times: in 1945 “tens of thousands of tired troops, dreaming of a white Christmas, are seeing enough of it from (train) car windows to last them a lifetime.”

A full 94 per cent of the passengers on trains originating from the West Coast on Christmas Eve were military or recently discharged military personnel.

Time Magazine notes that: Goodwill was everywhere. Civilians gifted their train tickets to returning servicemen and women. Others threw spirited, though condensed, parties for the trainloads of veterans who had even just short stopovers at their town's station.

A Colorado trucker reportedly drove 35 veterans marooned in Denver to their homes in Dallas and 34 points in between. And a Los Angeles taxi driver drove a carload of six new veterans 2,700 miles home to Chicago.

You can read the full Time article here:

<https://time.com/4151426/operation-magic-carpet/>



Following discharge, troops found further difficulties and delays getting home, like here at Union Station, Kansas City. Photo – unionstation.org | historycollection.com

# Inspiring everyday heroes

Following last week's devastating earthquake in Vanuatu, ProMedical and ProRescue have played a critical role in the nation's emergency response efforts. With communities across the country severely impacted, their swift and coordinated actions have been instrumental in providing assistance to those in need.

ProMedical teams were among the first to respond, delivering essential medical care under challenging conditions. They worked tirelessly to treat injuries, stabilise patients, and coordinate transport for those requiring urgent care. Despite limited resources, their efficiency and professionalism have been widely recognised.

Meanwhile, ProRescue teams have been focused on search-and-rescue operations, locating individuals trapped in rubble and providing aid to those stranded in hard-to-reach areas. Equipped with specialised tools and working in collaboration with local authorities, their work has been vital in reaching isolated communities.

The combined efforts of these organisations have ensured that emergency services reached areas that might otherwise have been overlooked. From medical aid to search-and-rescue missions, their work has provided a lifeline to affected communities during a critical time.

ProMedical and ProRescue's response highlights the importance of well-trained and well-prepared emergency services in disaster situations. Their efforts over the past week underscore their commitment to safeguarding the people of Vanuatu, even under the most difficult circumstances.

It goes without saying, this month they're our everyday heroes.



ProRescue worked tirelessly for 28 hours to assist with the extrication of seven live casualties. Photo – ProRescue Facebook

**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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