SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
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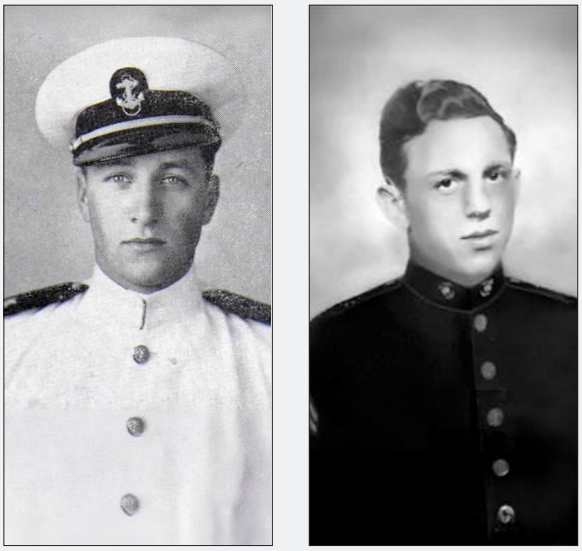
Searching for the Lost Flyers of Santo

An historic mission to find Lt. Walter Eck and PFC Irvin Korotki

In ten day's time, the South Pacific World War II Museum will embark on one of the most meaningful projects in its history — a search for the final resting place of two young U.S. Marine aviators who perished on Espiritu Santo more than 80 years ago.

On January 21, 1943, 1st Lt. Walter A. Eck and PFC Irvin P. Korotki of Marine Scout Bomber Squadron 132, the "Crying Red Asses," took off from Santo in their SBD-4 Dauntless dive bomber. The pair, both from the Milwaukee area in Wisconsin, were practicing dive-bombing manoeuvres when tragedy struck. Their aircraft failed to pull out of a dive and crashed in the thick jungle of Santo's northeast. Both men were killed instantly — Lt. Eck just 23 years old, PFC Korotki only 20.



Lt. Walter Eck and PFC Irvin Korotki. Photos – PFC Lawrence Gordon Foundation

Records show that a military team reached the crash site in May 1943 and buried the two Marines at the scene, unable to bring their remains back through the unforgiving terrain. A later recovery team in 1947 scoured the area for weeks but,

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hampered by dense jungle, declared the men "Non-Recoverable." Since then, the crash site has remained hidden, undisturbed for more than seven decades.

Now, thanks to a unique collaboration between the South Pacific WWII Museum and The PFC Lawrence Gordon Foundation (LGF), the search will begin anew.

As one of the 1947 recovery team members quipped, "the aircraft could be 10 feet from us and we'd never see it." The Vanuatu jungle is quite a challenge. Photo – Karl von Moller.

The Lawrence Gordon Foundation, a U.S.-based non-profit, is dedicated to finding and identifying American service members still missing from past wars. Their motto — "Honouring a Commitment" — reflects the promise of no man left behind.

The remains of Private First Class Lawrence S. Gordon are removed from a German war cemetery in France and start the journey home to Canada. Photo – Sean Prpick.

The Foundation has already achieved remarkable results, helping to identify and repatriate the remains of lost servicemen, including the groundbreaking case of Lt. Nathan Baskind, recovered from a mass grave in France.

Leading this mission to Santo is Jed Henry, president of LGF, along with a small but highly skilled volunteer team. Like the Museum, LGF is a not-for-profit organisation, relying entirely on donations and the dedication of volunteers. Every member of the team has offered their time and expertise freely, motivated by a shared desire to bring closure to families and honour the sacrifice of these lost airmen.

Filmmaker Jed Henry heads up the Lawrence Gordon Foundation. Here he's filmng a carriage carrying the remains of PFC Gordon. Photo – Mark Hoffman/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

For the South Pacific WWII Museum, this collaboration represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to assist in a project that connects directly to Santo's wartime history and to the Museum's mission of remembrance.

The challenge of locating Eck and Korotki after so many years lies in the very nature of Santo's jungle. Even in 1947, search teams described conditions so dense that a plane could have lain just ten feet away and gone unnoticed.

This time, the searchers will have a remarkable new tool on their side: LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging). Using a drone equipped with LiDAR scanners, the team will create high-resolution three-dimensional maps of the jungle canopy and the terrain below it.

A Douglas SBD similar to that of the aircraft Eck and Korotki were flying when it crashed on Santo. Photo – Time Life.

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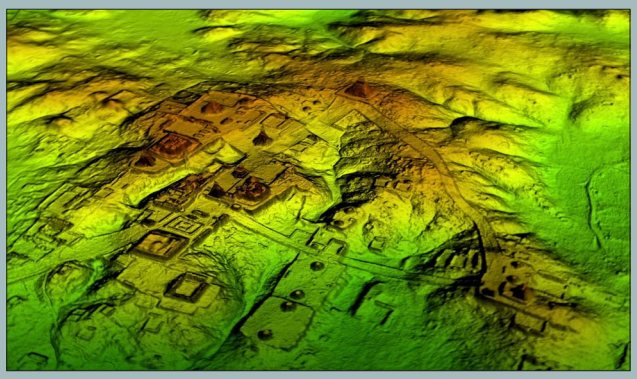
LiDAR works by firing rapid laser pulses from the air, measuring how long it takes for each to bounce back. This data can reveal shapes hidden beneath thick foliage, from the outline of a long-lost aircraft to man-made disturbances in the landscape.



A LiDAR scan of a huge Guatemalan city hidden under a jungle canopy. Photo – National Geographic.

Combined with boots-on-the-ground exploration, interviews with local Ni-Vanuatu who may have passed down knowledge of the crash site, and historical coordinates preserved in declassified U.S. military records, the team believes there is a real chance of success.

While the technology is impressive, at its heart this mission is about two young men who never made it home.

PFC Irvin P. Korotki, from Cudahy, Wisconsin, enlisted in April 1942 after attending Cudahy High School and Milwaukee Vocational School. He was just beginning his adult life when it was cut short at age 20.

1st Lt. Walter A. Eck, from Milwaukee, had already flown in 44 combat missions before his death. He was credited with sinking four Japanese ships and was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his courage and skill under fire. He left behind his parents, Walter and Lillian, and his sister Violet.

For decades, their families held out hope that Walter and Irvin might one day be found. In fact, it was Irvin's brother, Robert Litkowiec — now 88 years old — who first contacted LGF nearly a decade ago asking if anything could be done to bring his brother home. This mission is, in many ways, a response to that heartfelt request.

Irvin Korotki's brother, Robert Litkowiec. Video frame – Jed Henry.

The Museum is deeply honoured to stand alongside the Lawrence Gordon Foundation in this search. For our community on Santo, it is more than a recovery mission. It is a chance to connect living history with our landscape, to bear witness to the stories that unfolded here, and help bring closure to families half a world away.

The search will begin in 10 days, and in next month's newsletter, we will publish a full report on the mission and its findings — whether that be confirmation of the site, evidence of the crash, or, with hope, the discovery of the final resting place of Lt. Eck and PFC Korotki.

Some of the amazing work done by the Lawrence Gordon Foundation. These specialists are disinterring remains from a mass grave at the Marigny German War Cemetery in Thereval, France. The mission was to locate the remains of 1st Lt. Nathan Baskind. Photo – Jed Henry.

As with all such endeavours, success is not guaranteed. But what is certain is the dedication of everyone involved — the Museum, LGF, the families, and our supporters. Together, we are honouring the memory of two men who gave their lives in service and ensuring they are not forgotten.

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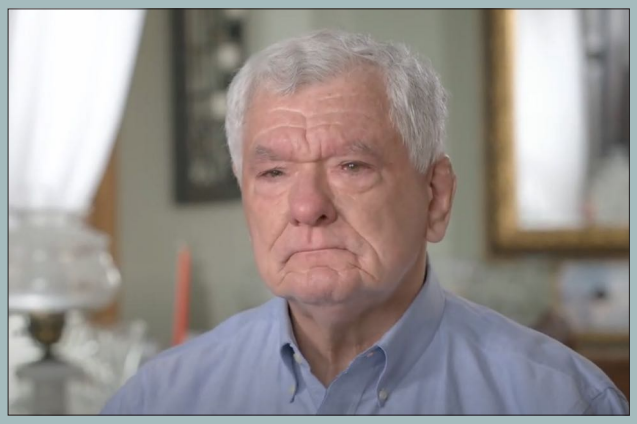
This project exemplifies the very purpose of the South Pacific WWII Museum: to remember, to educate, and to connect the past with the present. By lending our support, resources, and local knowledge, we play a vital role in a mission that may finally bring peace to families who have waited more than 80 years.



Walter Eck's nephew, Bruce Bailey is also hoping for mission success on Santo to finally give his family closure. Video frame – Jed Henry.

The story of Lt. Walter Eck and PFC Irvin Korotki is part of Santo's history, part of the world's history, and part of the enduring human commitment to never leave a comrade behind. This September, we will once again trek into the jungle to keep that promise.

Will the team be successful in finding Eck and Korotki? Somewhere on Santo is a Dauntless just like this one, just waiting to tell its secrets. Photo – Time Life.

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

Derailing the Tokyo Express

In August 1942, the United States launched its first major amphibious landing of the Second World War at Guadalcanal, an event that would transform the course of the Pacific War.

Known as Operation Watchtower, the assault began on 7 August when around 6,000 troops of the U.S. 1st Marine Division, under Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, went ashore on Guadalcanal, Tulagi, and nearby Florida Island in the southern Solomon Islands.

U.S. First Division Marines storm ashore across Guadalcanal's beaches on D-Day, 7 August 1942, from the attack transport USS Barnett (AP-11) and the attack cargo ship USS Fomalhaut (AK-22). Photo – US Archives.

The Japanese garrison was taken completely by surprise. Within thirty-six hours, American forces had captured an airfield under construction at Lunga Point, which they quickly finished and renamed Henderson Field. That strip of ground would soon become the most contested piece of real estate in the Pacific.

The decision to strike at Guadalcanal came after months of anxious observation of Japanese expansion. Since December 1941, Japan had swept through Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and by mid-1942 was building an airfield on Guadalcanal. From there, enemy aircraft could threaten vital supply lines between the United States and Australia and New Zealand. It could also serve as a springboard for further Japanese moves toward Port Moresby or even into the South Pacific, potentially cutting off Allied communications altogether. To halt this, American commanders planned the Solomons campaign, with the capture of Guadalcanal as its first priority.

The initial landings were surprisingly easy, supported by naval gunfire and aircraft. But what followed was anything but simple. The Japanese, shocked at first, quickly regrouped and mounted a series of determined counterattacks by land, sea, and air. Over the next six months, the campaign would become a brutal test of endurance for both sides.

On land, Marines and later U.S. Army reinforcements fought desperate battles around the perimeter of Henderson Field, including the famous night action at Edson's Ridge, where Japanese forces nearly broke through.

In the skies, the squadrons that became known as the "Cactus Air Force" flew from Henderson Field, harassing Japanese shipping and defending the tenuous Allied foothold.

The airfield at Lunga Point on Guadalcanal under construction by Japanese, July 1942. Photo – US Navy.

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At sea, a series of savage naval battles unfolded—Savo Island, the Eastern Solomons, Cape Esperance, and the great clash known as the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal.

During the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, USS President Jackson (AP-37) manoeuvres under Japanese air attack off Guadalcanal, 12 November 1942. Photo – Naval Heritage and History Command.

Many of these engagements were fought at night and at close range, costing both sides heavily. The waters around the island became so littered with wrecks that they earned the grim nickname "Ironbottom Sound."

The struggle for Guadalcanal was about more than one airfield. It was a battle for control of the South Pacific and for the momentum of the war. For the Japanese, it became a desperate effort to dislodge the Americans before they could consolidate their position.

Supplies and reinforcements were rushed in nightly along the route dubbed the "Tokyo Express," but air attacks from Henderson and aggressive American naval resistance steadily whittled down Japanese strength.

Japanese transport Kinugawa Maru was sunk at Guadalcanal November 1943. She had been attempting to deliver men and supplies to Japanese forces holding the northern part of the island. Photo – US Navy.

For the Allies, it was a test of their ability to sustain an offensive far from home bases, coordinating land, sea, and air forces in ways that had never before been attempted on such a scale.

By February 1943, the Japanese could no longer sustain the fight. After losing thousands of men, dozens of ships, and irreplaceable aircraft, they evacuated their remaining forces under cover of night.

The victory cost the Allies dearly, but it was decisive. Guadalcanal was the first major land offensive won by Allied forces in the Pacific, and it stopped Japan's strategic expansion in its tracks. Just as importantly, it gave the Allies a base from which to push northward, beginning the long island-hopping campaign that would eventually carry them across the Pacific to the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.

Despite the arrival of Japanese troops on Guadalcanal in early September 1942, they could not overcome the sheer might of Allied forces. Photo – Unknown source.

The psychological impact was just as great. Until Guadalcanal, Japanese forces had seemed almost unstoppable, their advance unchecked since the attack on Pearl Harbour. Now, for the first time, they had been thrown back in a major battle.

For the Allies, particularly for the United States and its partners Australia and New Zealand, the victory was a powerful boost to morale. It proved that the Japanese could be beaten, that American industry and determination could sustain an offensive far from home, and that the initiative in the Pacific had shifted.

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Looking back, the Guadalcanal campaign was a turning point as significant as the Battle of Midway. Midway had halted Japanese expansion; Guadalcanal began the Allied counteroffensive.

Marines are kept busy loading material into Higgins landing craft on the beach at Guadalcanal when the call came to leave. Photo – USMC Museum.

It was the foundation upon which all subsequent victories in the Pacific were built. The landing in August 1942 was the beginning of a new phase of the war—one in which the Allies would no longer simply defend but relentlessly push forward until victory was achieved.

The Solomon Islands as they are today. A far cry from the brutal, dark days of the Pacific War. Photo – Tourism Solomons.

Agent High Pockets

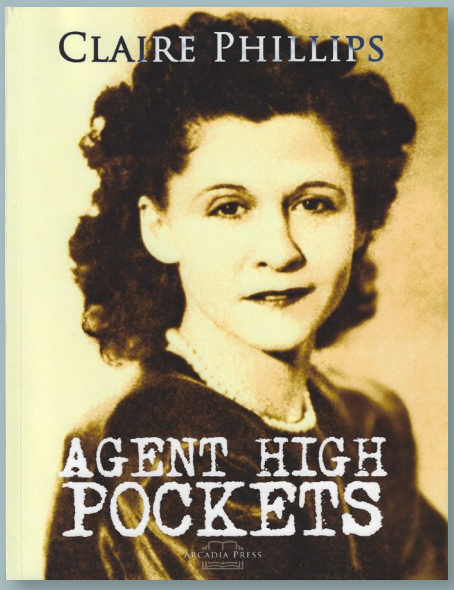
A book review by Tammi Johnson

I have read A LOT of WWII books and a few years ago I started finding stories of extraordinary women who served in many capacities; clerical, medical, factory workers, code breakers – and some that put their very lives in danger to serve. One such woman was the subject of a book by Edna Bautista Binkowski titled Code Name Agent High Pockets: True Story of Claire Phillips. This book was a fascinating story of an American woman who served as a spy in Manila, Philippines after the fall to the Japanese late in 1941. Claire later wrote her own biography, ***Agent High Pockets***, and I've pulled from both books for the review.

Claire was a traveling singer with a musical group performing in the Philippines when she married "Mr. Wrong" and had a daughter, Dian. She left him and returned to the states but soon became bored in America after travelling through the South Pacific. She returned with her toddler daughter at the worst time in September of 1941. Friends warned her about rising tensions with the Japanese, but she remained in the danger zone. Claire soon met and fell in love with an American soldier, John Phillips, but the fall of Manila drove Claire and her friends into hiding in the mountains, surviving on rice and whatever else they could find to eat while dodging the advancement of the Japanese as they captured more territory. John had to return to his unit, sending notes and support to Claire when he could until they lost touch due to his capture.

While in the mountains she met American soldiers who were lost from their units and preparing to form a guerilla band to fight the Japanese. They needed someone back in Manila with connections and the means to pass information and supplies back and forth between supply sources and the guerilla troops in the mountains. Being a known singer in the city, she decided to leave her daughter with people who could care for her and keep her safe, while she re-established herself in a night club in Manila frequented by the Japanese.

She managed to gather information aiding the cause and helping destroy much of the Japanese defences before getting caught and sent to a prison camp with others caught in the conflict.



I will share no more that could be spoilers, I could write so much more. I'll just say her story is one of bravery, courage and pure, all-out determination to not let the enemy win. More women will be profiled, but Claire had to come first.

Enjoy the read!

Resistance Under the Palms

How the New Hebrides Aligned with the Free French

You might assume the first echoes of World War II in Vanuatu—then the New Hebrides—began with Base Button on Espiritu Santo or the Americans landing at Port Vila. In fact, the tremors started thousands of kilometres away in Europe. France's fall in 1940 sent political shockwaves throughout the South Pacific long before the vast Allied bases arrived.

In June 1940, the swift collapse of France under Nazi invasion left its far-flung colonies in a perilous state—economically adrift and politically uncertain. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the Anglo-French New Hebrides Condominium (modern-day Vanuatu), where dual colonial systems already created administrative chaos.

When the news of France's fall reached the islands, the French Resident-Commissioner, Henri Sautot—who had served in the New Hebrides since 1933—took decisive action. He convened local French settlers in July and secured near-unanimous backing for General de Gaulle's Free French movement, making the New Hebrides the first French territory anywhere to rally to Free France.

French Resident Commissioner Henri Sautot. Photo – Musée de L'ordre de la Liberation

Sautot broadcast his declaration of allegiance by radio and subsequently resigned his post—but his symbolic move reverberated across the region. In the nearby French colony of New Caledonia, French settlers and the Conseil Général followed suit with overwhelming support, though hesitation persisted within the colonial administration. The British High Commissioner for the Western Pacific visited both territories, lending diplomatic and practical support amid economic upheaval.

The colonial aviso Dumont-d'Urville at the quay in Noumea. Photo – Unknown source.

Tensions escalated when the Vichy-aligned governor in New Caledonia transferred control to a military commandant and a French warship, the Dumont d'Urville, arrived—prompting the local Conseil Général to resign and a state of siege to be declared. Against this backdrop, the former Resident-Commissioner of the New Hebrides re-emerged as Free French governor.

With strong local support, he was escorted aboard HMAS Adelaide to Nouméa in September 1940.

HMAS Adelaide upon which former French Resident Commissioner Henri Sautot was escorted to Nouméa. Photo – AWM.

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Landed under the watchful guns of the warship, he and supporters quickly seized control of defences, and the pro-Vichy officials capitulated.

A small boat brings Henri Sautot to the quay. Photo – ML Claude.

Free French governor Henri Sautot (with helmet and cane), takes off his raincoat after disembarking HMAS Adelaide following the rallying of New Caledonia to Free France, 19 September 1940. Photo – LG Viale.

Similar realignments occurred in Tahiti and other French island possessions. Though a small pro-Vichy coup in Tahiti was attempted in mid-September 1940, it was peacefully suppressed—further consolidating the islands' stance against Axis power.

Badge of the Pacific Marine Infantry Regiment, New Caledonia. Photo – Wikipedia.

From these island territories flowed volunteers into the Bataillon du Pacifique—composed of Tahitians and New Caledonians—who would go on to fight valiantly across North Africa and Europe.

Members of the Bataillon du Pacifique, Louis Kasni Warti stands to the left of the flag bearer, Jean Tranape. They are in the courtyard of the La Tour-Maubourg barracks in Paris and await General de Gaulle, who will come to say goodbye and congratulate the Battalion's volunteers.

Two distinct wartime phases unfolded across these French Pacific territories.

The first, following the fall of France in mid-1940, brought political turmoil and economic crisis, prompting support from regional powers like Australia and New Zealand.

The second phase, triggered by Japan's Pacific advance in early 1942, ushered in a period of economic boom, underpinned by the arrival of American troops and massive Dollar-funded infrastructure—ushering in unprecedented prosperity by 1942–43.

The contrast was sharp: in 1940, the islands' economies were crumbling, dependent on aid from British dominions; by 1943, buoyed by United States support, they had never known greater prosperity.

Through political courage and steadfast allegiance, the French island colonies played a vital role in the Allied presence in the South Pacific—and laid the groundwork for their central place in the region's wartime history.

The "Firebug"

Honouring Flight Lieutenant William Ellis Newton VC

Flight Lieutenant William Ellis Newton, known as "Bill," was born on June 8, 1919, in St Kilda, Melbourne. Educated at Melbourne Grammar School, he was an accomplished sportsman, notably a fast bowler in cricket.

Despite his sporting prowess, Newton chose a different path, working in a Melbourne silk warehouse before enlisting in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) on February 5, 1940.

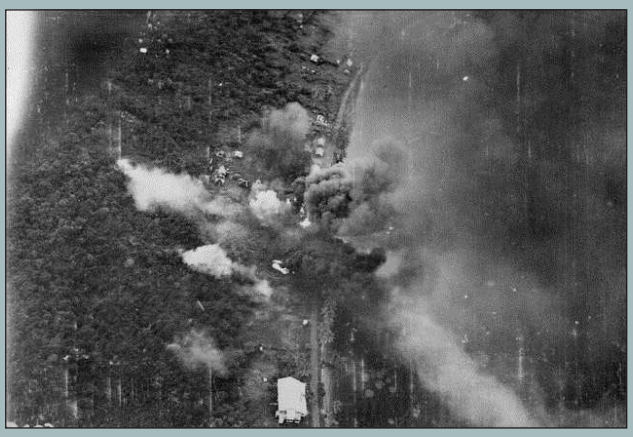
After completing his training, Newton was posted to No. 22 Squadron, RAAF, which had recently converted from Hudson bombers to the more advanced Douglas Boston aircraft. The squadron was initially engaged in convoy escort and anti-submarine patrols off Sydney before moving north to Townsville, Queensland, and later to Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea in November 1942.

Flight Lieutenant William Ellis Newton VC. Photo – AWM.

Throughout his service, Newton completed 52 operational sorties. He was known for his courage and determination, often pressing home attacks despite intense anti-aircraft fire. His aggressive tactics and leadership earned him the nickname "The Firebug" among his comrades.

Douglas Boston (A-20) aircraft of No. 22 Squadron RAAF in South West Pacific Area. No. 22 was the only Australian squadron which was equipped with this type. Photo – AWM.

On March 16, 1943, Newton led a raid on the Salamaua Isthmus, a Japanese stronghold in New Guinea. During the mission, his aircraft was hit by 40mm cannon fire, causing significant damage.



Salamaua, New Guinea, March 1943. An aerial view of one of two attacks by Boston bomber aircraft of No. 22 Squadron RAAF carried out at low level. Flight Lieutenant W. E. Newton led the attack. Photo – Key Military

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Salamaua isthmus seen from the air during a 22 Squadron strike against its headquarters buildings, jetties and storage facilities. Photo – Key Military

Despite the extensive damage, Newton continued his attack, dropping bombs on enemy storage buildings and strafing the target with machine-gun fire. He managed to return to base, where his aircraft was found to be marked with ninety-eight bullet holes.

Two days later, on March 18, Newton and his crew participated in another raid on Salamaua. During the attack, his aircraft was struck by cannon fire, causing it to burst into flames. Attempting to keep the aircraft aloft to allow his crew to escape, Newton was forced to ditch the plane in the sea approximately 1,000 yards offshore. While Newton and his wireless operator, Flight Sergeant John Lyon, survived and managed to swim ashore, their navigator, Sergeant Basil Eastwood, was killed in the forced landing.

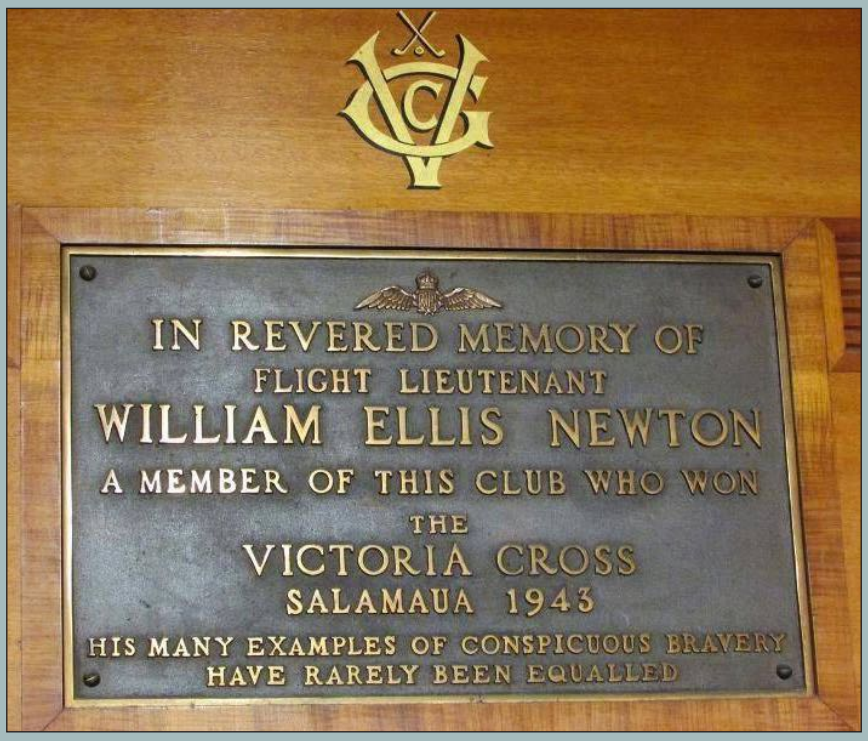
After reaching the shore, Newton and Lyon were assisted by local natives and made their way inland, aiming to contact an Australian Coastwatcher.

However, they were eventually captured by a Japanese patrol and taken to Salamaua. They were interrogated until March 20, before being moved to Lae. While in Lae, Lyon was executed by bayonet on the orders of Rear Admiral Ruitaro Fujita, the senior Japanese commander in the area.

Newton was returned to Salamaua, where, on March 29, 1943, he was executed by beheading. His captor, Sub-Lieutenant Uichi Komai, was later killed in the Philippines, and Rear Admiral Fujita committed suicide at the end of the war.

Newton's bravery and sacrifice were recognized posthumously with the award of the Victoria Cross. His mother, Minnie Newton, was presented with the medal by the Duke of Gloucester on November 30, 1945. Newton's Victoria Cross is on display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, Australia.

In early 1944, the recently constructed No. 4 Airfield in Nadzab was renamed Newton Field in his honour. A plaque dedicated to No. 22 Squadron was unveiled at the Australian War Memorial on March 16, 2003, the sixtieth anniversary of Newton's attack on Salamaua.



A plaque that hangs proudly as part of the Victoria Golf Club Honour Roll, commemorates William Ellis Newton, a former member of the club. Photo – Unknown source.

Luganville's changing face

This month we're looking over the western end of Luganville, comparing its appearance in 1943 with how it looks today. The changes are striking, but it's remarkable that a few Quonset huts are still standing – survivors of more than 80 years.

Luganville was pretty much a sea of quonset huts, In every street from the waterfront back to the hills, they were lined up in rows performing a wide range of functions from warehouse storage to blacksmith's shops and automotive repair. Photo – US Archives.

Today the ships are gone and so have most of the wharfs and jetties. Even the shape of the island along the Segond Channel has changed quite a bit due to tidal and cyclonic erosion. Photo – Google Earth.

All hands on Fiji

We usually focus our stories on Espiritu Santo and the remarkable wartime history that unfolded here. This month, however, we're casting our net a little wider — looking further afield to Fiji. Though no battles were fought on its shores, Fiji played a vital role in the defence of the South Pacific, providing a secure base for Allied forces, a staging ground for campaigns to the north, and a shield for Australia and New Zealand. It's a fascinating chapter in the region's history, and one that deserves to be remembered alongside the better-known stories of the Solomons and New Guinea. We hope you enjoy this look at Fiji's unsung contribution to victory in the Pacific.

When the news of Pearl Harbour reached Suva, Fiji in December 1941, it felt as if a distant storm had suddenly shifted course. Until then, Fiji had been a quiet colonial outpost, known more for sugar exports than soldiers. Overnight, its lagoons and harbours became potential battlegrounds, and its people were swept into the tides of the Pacific War.

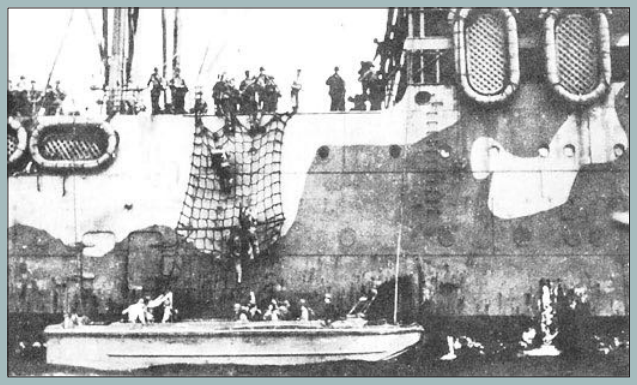
Prior to the outbreak of WWII, Fiji was like many South Pacific islands – an idyllic colonial outpost. This is Victoria Parade looking towards Dominion House in the 1940s. Photo – Fiji Museum.

Long before the first American uniforms appeared on Suva's docks, Fiji's leaders were uneasy. With war looming, the colony had quietly built coastal defences — batteries positioned on headlands, anti-aircraft guns trained toward the sky. A skeleton military force, mostly volunteers, drilled on parade grounds, their wooden rifles later replaced with steel.

The fear was real. Japanese forces had swept through Southeast Asia and the islands north of Fiji. Many believed that Suva or Nadi might be next. Mothers hushed children at night as rumours spread of enemy submarines offshore. Though the feared invasion never came, the preparations left their mark: Fiji would never again be the sleepy South Seas colony it once was.

In 1942, everything changed. Ships heavy with men and machinery began arriving in Suva Harbour. They were Americans — thousands of them. With their bulldozers, cranes, and famed "Seabees," they turned patches of jungle into sprawling bases almost overnight.

At Vuda Point, on the western side of Viti Levu, palm groves gave way to a massive anchorage where warships could refuel and repair.



US Marines board a landing craft at Fiji, 28 July 1942, to practice amphibious landings in preparation for Guadalcanal. Photo – Wikipedia.

Suva, meanwhile, became the administrative brain of the operation, its narrow streets suddenly crowded with Allied uniforms, supply trucks, and naval officers clutching maps.

One local recalled the shock of seeing an American aircraft carrier glide into Fijian waters: "It was like a floating city," he said. "We realised then that our islands had become part of something much larger."

While Americans built bases, Fijians themselves answered the call. More than 8,000 men enlisted, serving at home and abroad.

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The first Fijian force to undertake service in the Solomons was this special party of 23 guerrillas. Photo – Pacific Paratrooper.

The Fiji Military Forces fought bravely in the Solomon Islands, where they became experts at jungle warfare — often guiding Allied troops through dense terrain and ambushes. At home, villagers provided food and labour, while women joined nursing and auxiliary services.

There was pride in the contribution but also sacrifice. Families waved goodbye to sons who would never return, and villages adapted to shortages as resources were redirected to the war effort.

Ladies' Machine Gun Corps on Fiji Day. Photo – fiji.webs.com/C.LIAVA'A.

By 1943, Fiji had transformed into a humming hub of the Allied war machine. Hospitals received the wounded from Guadalcanal and Bougainville. Convoys of ships steamed northward from its harbours, carrying supplies, ammunition, and fresh troops. Aircraft thundered off newly built airstrips, bound for patrols across the Coral Sea.

The islands also became a crossroads of nations. New Zealanders trained alongside Tongans and Americans. High-ranking commanders passed through, among them Admiral Chester Nimitz and General Douglas MacArthur. For local people, it was as though the whole world had suddenly arrived at their doorsteps.

Imagine standing on the waterfront in Suva: the harbour filled with destroyers, the streets buzzing with soldiers on leave.

US Navy Seabees built a Fleet Recreation Centre at Vunda Point, Fiji. Photo – Wikipedia.

But the Pacific War moved quickly. As the Allies pushed the Japanese back through the Solomons and into the Philippines, Fiji's role diminished. By late 1944, the grand naval bases that had sprung up almost overnight began to empty. Hospitals closed, depots were dismantled, and the endless convoys moved on.

By January 1945, much of the American presence was gone. Vuda Point, once alive with warships, was quiet again, its buildings handed back to the colonial authorities.

Warren "Doc" Fabyan served in Fiji from July 1942 to November 1944 as an MP working closely with the Fiji Police. Made an honorary policeman, he even received a uniform, now in the Museum's collection. Photo – South Pacific WWII Museum/David Cambio.

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Only a few naval officers remained in Suva, tying up the loose ends of a wartime chapter that had ended sooner than anyone expected.

A Dakota DC-3 transport plane and truck, with unidentified army officers and locals, at the Nausori Airfield, Fiji not long after the War in the Pacific had ended. Photo – natlib.govt.nz.

Though the guns never fired in anger on Fijian soil, the war left deep marks. The bases built by Americans introduced new infrastructure and ideas. The men who fought in the Solomons returned with broader horizons, their service reshaping Fiji's sense of itself in the world.

For three brief, intense years, Fiji was more than an island chain in the South Seas. It was a shield protecting the routes to Australia and New Zealand, a hospital for the wounded, and a launchpad for the battles that turned the tide of the Pacific War.

Today, that chapter is often overshadowed by the drama of Guadalcanal or Iwo Jima. But Fiji's story deserves to be remembered — not for battles fought, but for the battles made possible because Fiji stood ready.

Members of the Fiji Defense Force during the installation of BL Mark VII guns at the Momi Bay Battery in 1941. They may never have been fired in anger, but they stood ready to defend against enemy attack. Photo – National Trust of Fiji Islands.

Inspiring everyday heroes

Two well-known figures in Vanuatu's sporting community are calling for stronger support and outreach programs for young people, following the success of International Youth Day 2025 at the Agathis Sports Facility.

National beach Volleyball player Stivano Banga (l) and Futsal coach Rio Jimmy. Photo – Vourie Molivakoro Vanuatu Daily Post.

Futsal coach and referee Rio Jimmy, and national beach volleyball player and gold medallist Stivano Banga, praised the raw talent on display during the youth tournaments, urging authorities to provide more pathways for aspiring athletes.

"There is potential in some of the players," said Jimmy. "With proper training, they could be the next footballers."

Banga echoed his words, pointing to the skills shown in volleyball. "If we want more youths representing Vanuatu, we need to act now."

This year's International Youth Day, themed "Localising Sustainable Development Goals", featured futsal and beach volleyball tournaments with teams from Port Vila's Northern Ward, including Manples, Tagabe, Agathis, and Holen.

Vanuatu National Youth Council administrator Joe Higgs Kalo said the event aimed to tackle youth challenges in the area. "With police operations increasing due to youth-related problems, it was important to create positive activities that help young people focus on their future."

Bladiniere Futsal team won the knockout competition, followed by Agathis, Sara, and 72 Futsal from Holen.

For Jimmy and Banga, the day was about more than sport. It was a reminder of the potential in Vanuatu's youth—and the need to nurture it.

Honouring the past to empower and inspire the next generation.

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