SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
VANUATU

South Pacific WWII Museum

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From London to Luganville

During September, the South Pacific WWII Museum was delighted to welcome Sam Swire and Geoff Cundle, Chairman and CEO of the Swire Shipping Group, who were in Luganville for a series of meetings.

Their visit began with a VIP tour of Million Dollar Point and the Coolidge dive site, chauffeured in one of the Museum's 1942 Willys Jeeps, brought by barge from nearby Aore Island. Following the tour, Chairman Bradley Wood and Project Manager Jimmy Carter guided Sam and Geoff through a personal tour of the museum. They were joined by Museum Support Officer Marina Moli and board member and volunteer Lemy Nacisse for the tour.

Chairman and CEO of the Swire Shipping Group Geoff Cundle (left), Sam Swire and Museum Chairman Bradley Wood, stand with 'Nellie' the Museum's Willys Jeep on the site of the old PT Boat Base in Luganville.

The visitors were shown our newly refreshed displays, posters, and the recently unveiled Kastom exhibit. Sam and Geoff were extremely complimentary about the museum, and we extend our sincere thanks to them for taking the time to visit and experience the unique stories we share here in Luganville.

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

Afloat against odds

Makeshift repairs and courage saved the USS Alhena from sinking

A case of a photo that defies belief. This is the USS Alhena, a seven thousand ton cargo ship that was converted for military purposes to carry supplies and troops into war zones.

Or rather this is the Alhena after a torpedo attack that blasted this very visible hole in the aft of the vessel.

In August and September, she would shuttle supplies to the US Marines battling to hold Guadalcanal – facing daytime air attack and then retiring at night back to Espiritu Santo.

On the night of 29 September 1942, Alhena had just finished unloading off Guadalcanal when disaster struck.

At six minutes to midnight, the Japanese submarine I-4 fired a torpedo that slammed into her aft section near the No. 5 hold.

The explosion ripped through the ship, killing four men outright, wounding twenty more, and leaving over two dozen embarked Marines missing.

Fires broke out and water poured in, threatening to sink her. According to the Navy's own War Damage Report, the blast caused "extensive damage in the after part of the ship," forcing the crew to erect makeshift bulkheads of "sheets of plywood and other lumber" in an effort to keep her afloat.

Through the long night, Alhena drifted helplessly, her crew battling smoke and flooding with improvised tools and desperate energy.

The official history notes that they "constructed temporary bulkheads" and brought the fires under control, stabilising the ship just enough to prevent her from foundering.

Help came the next day. The destroyer Monssen took her in tow on 1 October, but the task proved too heavy.

On 2 October, the fleet tug Navajo relieved her, towing the crippled cargo ship across dangerous waters back to Espiritu Santo, where she arrived on 7 October.

USS Alhena – sporting her very visible battle scars – probably after her harrowing voyage back to Espiritu Santo, Photo – US Naval Institute.

There, shipfitters applied further temporary repairs before she was hauled to Nouméa and, eventually, 2,500 miles south to Sydney.

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For the men aboard, it had been a night of fire, flooding, and improvisation, fought not with guns but with hoses, hammers, and scraps of wood. Their efforts kept Alhena alive, allowing her to be rebuilt and returned to service. This time as a fully-fledged AKA – the designation for ships able to carry and launch waves of Marines to the beaches, using Higgins and other landing craft.

She would go onto to serve in the invasions of the Philippines, Saipan, and Iwo Jima.

Her would-be destroyer, the I-4 lasted no longer than 3 months after the torpedoing, sunk in the Gilbert Islands by a US submarine.

A general view of the torpedo damage. The stern has been raised considerably by shifting oil and armament forward. Photo – Naval History and Heritage Command.

The torpedo damage to the port shell of the USS Alhena upon her arrival in port at Espiritu Santo. Photo – Naval History and Heritage Command.

A mission of remembrance
Searching for Santo's lost marines

As we reported in the August issue of our newsletter, the South Pacific World War II Museum recently embarked 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 Milwaukee, Wisconsin, were practicing dive-bombing manoeuvres when tragedy struck. Their aircraft failed to pull out of a dive and crashed into the dense jungle of Santo's northeast. Lt. Eck was just 23 years old, PFC Korotki only 20.

Now, thanks to a unique collaboration between the South Pacific WWII Museum and the PFC Lawrence Gordon Foundation, the search began anew this September.

Using LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology mounted on a drone to penetrate the thick jungle canopy, the team set out to create high-resolution three-dimensional maps of the terrain – an extraordinary modern surveying and mapping tool in pursuit of an 80-year-old mystery.

But while the technology was cutting-edge, the heart of the mission remained timeless: to honour two young men who never made it home, and to fulfil the enduring promise to leave no comrade behind.

A squadron of Dauntless aircraft similar to what Pilot Walter Eck and Irvin Korotki (top left) were flying over Espiritu Santo. Photo – LIFE Magazine.

A military team reached the crash site in May 1943 and buried the two Marines at the scene, unable to bring their remains out of the unforgiving terrain. A later recovery team in 1947 scoured the area for weeks but, hampered by impenetrable jungle, declared the men "Non-Recoverable." Since then, the crash site has remained hidden and undisturbed for more than seven decades.

Day One – Into the Jungle

The mission began at first light with the museum team and local policeman Edward, who had first hand experience of an aircraft wreck in the search area. After collecting the search team from Turtle Bay Resort, the

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group headed to Hog Harbour to meet Chief Kevan Kuvu, who had accompanied a preliminary visit the previous week. Chief Kevan guided the team to the site of a long-rumoured aircraft crash – one that Edward himself remembered playing on as a child.

As the LiDAR drone operators launched their equipment to scan the dense jungle canopy, the rest of the team swept the area with metal detectors, digging test holes under the direction of archaeologist and anthropologist Ian Magee. Despite hours of searching, no trace of the missing Dauntless emerged.

The group pressed on to a narrow side road where they encountered a team of copra cutters. One shared a tantalising story of his father finding a skull while hunting in the jungle years ago. Could it be connected to the war? With spirits renewed, the team travelled to Port Olry to regroup over lunch at Chez Louis restaurant and consultation with local chiefs and elders.

Chief Kevan Kuvu stands with Museum board member and guide Mayumi Green at Kevan's village at Hog Harbour. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

While they confirmed the crash of another aircraft just offshore during the war, there were no solid leads on Eck and Korotki's plane. A meeting was arranged with the wife of the local man who had seen the skull, setting up an important rendezvous for the following morning.

Day Two – Stories in the Sand

Another early start saw the team split into smaller groups. While some returned to the previous days' location to film Edward recounting his childhood memories of the crash site, the LiDAR team settled into Chez Louis – perhaps the most scenic office imaginable – to process the previous day's scans.

The LiDAR drone team of Andrew Lashmar and Forrest Briggs of USA LiDAR (in the foreground) certainly found Chez Louis the ideal spot to 'crunch data'.

Meanwhile, efforts to track down further leads finally bore fruit. Another Port Olry resident recounted how bones had once been discovered on a beach and buried in a cave. The team jumped back in their Hilux and were taken to the small cave. Ian's expert eye quickly ruled it out: the undisturbed sand and soil layers showed no sign of a burial.

Inside the cave that supposedly contained bones archaeologist/ anthropologist Ian Magee and the Museum's Lemy Nacisse examine the ground for signs of human remains. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

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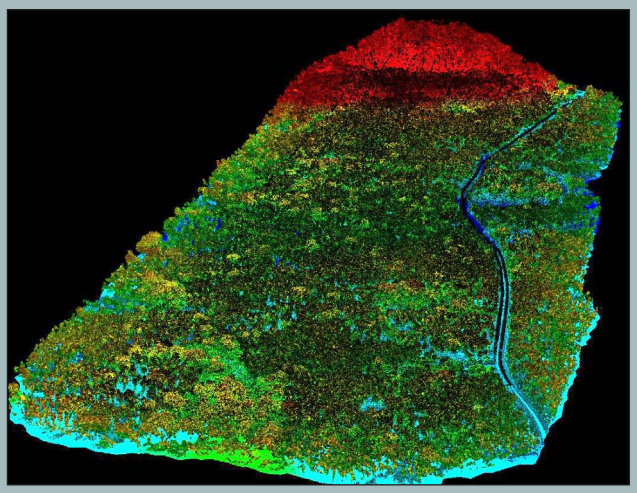

A LiDAR image of the serach area. The red at the top is the south face of a mountain. You can clearly see the road to Port Olry winding up the right side of the scan.

However, by day's end the group had secured a promising lead with Aurel, who agreed to show them the burial site of other bones the next day. Spirits were lifted as the LiDAR team shared the first processed images of the jungle terrain – data that might hold the key to the mystery.

Day Three – Bones and False Alarms

Back at the suspected crash area, the drone team flew additional passes to complete their scans while

The second bone site and remains can be clearly seen on the surface. An examination by Ian Magee confirmed they were "bovine" – a cow had died here at some years ago. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

others followed Aurel into the bush. After a short hike, the group reached a rocky cutting where bones were clearly visible. The discovery caused a ripple of excitement – until Ian's analysis revealed the remains belonged to a cow, not a human.

Local villagers shared another intriguing twist: five years earlier, Australian officials had reportedly removed other bones from the same site for DNA testing. Who they were and what became of those remains a mystery the museum intends to pursue.

With rain clouds gathering, the team returned to Chez Louis for an afternoon of data processing – and a few well-earned Tusker beers – as the heavens opened.

Day Four – Rain Stops Play

The next morning, heavy tropical downpours turned roads to rivers and brought drone operations to a halt. A weather report later revealed nearly a metre of rain had fallen on Santo in just over two days. To make matters worse, the drone's GPS system failed, grounding the LiDAR team completely.

While the team spent much of the day waiting out the storm at Chez Louis, the silver lining was that several days of LiDAR scans had already been secured for later analysis.

Day Five – Farewell Without Closure

With flights booked and equipment packed, the final day offered no chance for further searching. Instead, the team visited Santo's iconic sites, including the RiRi Blue Holes and Million Dollar Point, before saying farewell to their partners in this extraordinary mission.

Despite the lack of a breakthrough, the team left with valuable data and a renewed determination to continue the search. The jungle may still guard its secret, but each expedition adds to the body of knowledge – and the hope – that one day Lt. Walter Eck and PFC Irvin Korotki will finally return home.

The Search Continues

Why, after 82 years, has the site remained undiscovered? Perhaps the original crash location was misidentified. Perhaps the wreckage was removed or

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scattered over time. Small aircraft on Santo were sometimes salvaged for scrap, and jungle growth can swallow even large objects in a matter of years.

What is certain is that the South Pacific WWII Museum will not give up. Guided by archival records, first-hand accounts, and the latest technology, we will continue to follow every lead. The promise to bring these two Marines home remains as strong today as it was in 1943.

The search team gather for a final photo with a nod to the missing Dauntless aircrew. From Left to right standing, Torquil Macleod, Luke Henry Jed Henry, Forrest Briggs, Andrew Lashmar and Jimmy Carter. Croucing is Ian Magee. Photo – Mayumi Green.

A Team Effort Across Oceans

This project has been an extraordinary undertaking, bringing together people from around the world and across Vanuatu.

The PFC Lawrence Gordon Foundation team, led by Jed Henry, included his brother Luke Henry, LiDAR specialist Forrest Briggs of USA LiDAR – all from the USA, drone expert Andrew Lashmar from Innoflight Technology in Brisbane, and archaeologist/anthropologist Ian Magee from Ireland. Each gave their time freely in support of the mission.

From the South Pacific WWII Museum, Jimmy Carter worked with Jed since late 2024 to plan the visit to Santo and coordinate research and logistics. Mayumi Green served as guide, translator, navigator, driver—and creator of some outstanding picnic lunches—keeping the team moving and well fed throughout the week. Lemy Nacisse joined the search on two days as a translator and an enormous help in the field. Even Museum Chairman Bradley Wood rolled up his sleeves to help shepherd the drone batteries through Customs – a saga in itself.

We are equally grateful to the wonderful people of Espiritu Santo's east coast. Chief Kaven Kuvu and his brothers Edward and Jimmy Kevin welcomed us warmly, giving their time and granting access to their Kastom land.

At Chez Louis in Port Olry, Louis and his family not only provided a base of operations – our unofficial "drone headquarters" – but also kept the team fuelled with burgers and beverages in return for most of the week.

And to Aurel and his wife, whose kindness and willingness to share what they knew helped guide our search, we offer our heartfelt thanks.

Finally, to all the people of Port Olry and Hog Harbour: Tanku Tumas for your enthusiasm, generosity, and spirit. We could not have achieved what we did in such a short space of time without your help. We hope to come back one day and retrieve what remains of that aircraft engine under the sand.

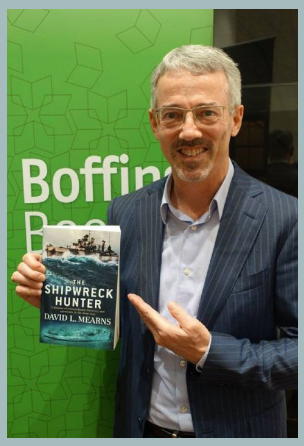
The Shipwreck Hunter

A lifetime of extraordinary discovery and adventure in the deep seas

A book review by Tammi Johnson

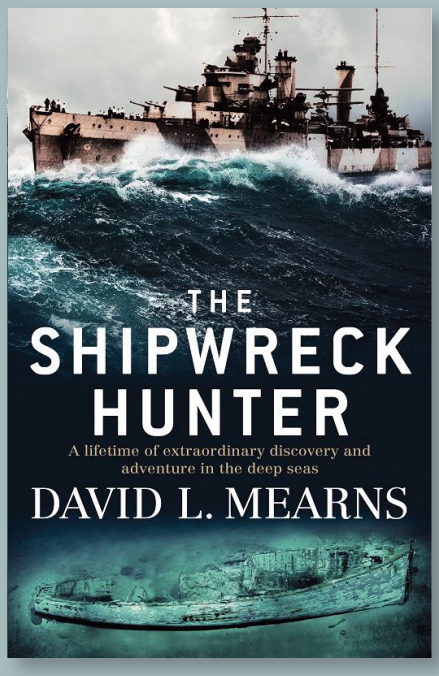
Lost vessels have always been fascinating to me, most probably because of the loss of Strong DD467 and my great uncle Billy. The shipwrecks of WWII have a multitude of stories, both of the men who survived and those lost. The people who go searching for these ships have their own stories to add as they search for our lost history. One man who does this so well is shipwreck hunter David Mearns. David was born and raised in New Jersey but has lived in England since his early 20s. He currently runs a company called Blue Water Recoveries, LTD.

I first met David in 2011 (after learning of him from another shipwreck hunter) and we started working together and researching Strong in 2012. For about four years he helped me with research. When he needed to go home to finish this book he introduced me to Paul Mayer of the RV Petrel crew and Strong was found in February of 2019. Though David wasn't the one who found Strong, it never would have happened without him.



The author David Mearns at Boffins Books. Photo – Supplied.

In his career he's located dozens of historic wrecks from WWII and beyond, some ships lost to criminal intent (MV Lucona) and others to the vagaries of nature without a trace. All of these wrecks are profiled in his book released in 2017, "The Shipwreck Hunter: A lifetime of extraordinary discovery and adventure in the deep seas." David kindly mentions me and my work in searching for Strong at the end in a section titled "Waiting to be found." His expertise in the field is unsurpassed. Among the wrecks found over his years working with people such as the late Paul G. Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, are the IJN Musashi, MV Derbyshire, HMS Hood, HMAS Sydney (the



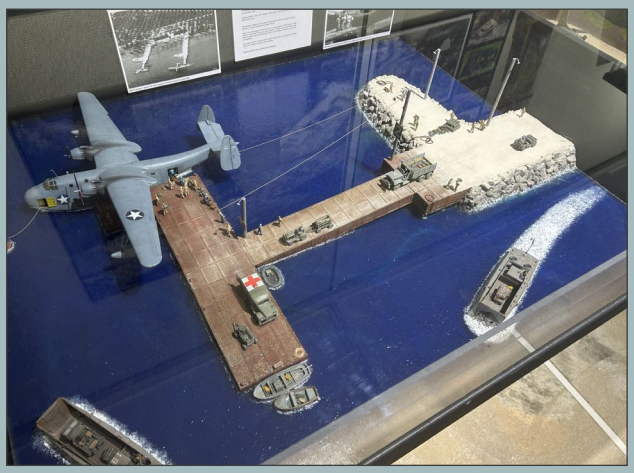
largest single loss of life for the Australian navy at over 600 men) and the HSK Kormoran (the German ship that sunk Sydney) and Vasco Da Gama's treasure ship, the Esmeralda. He appears in several episodes of Drain the Oceans on the National Geographic Channel and other independent documentaries. Other books he has published deal specifically with the wrecks of the HMAS Sydney and the HMS Hood. Those will be profiled at a later date.

He's remained a friend and someone I can still call on for information. His knowledge of the ocean currents, wind direction and other conditions to be considered in a search is incredible. I highly recommend this book.

Building history, piece by piece

As a child in the 1970s, Jimmy Carter loved building scale models. Nothing fancy—just the basic Airfix plastic kits you'd buy from a local toy store. Fast forward a few decades, and the museum has given him the chance to relive that childhood hobby – only on a much grander scale.

Earlier this year, three larger dioramas, one smaller one, and an aircraft without a display base arrived in a shipping container sent by Museum Chairman Bradley Wood, along with personal effects from Australia. These joined three models already at the museum—including a large 1/6 scale Willys Jeep. Adding to the collection, Jimmy personally brought a scale model



The largest diorama in the museum details the activities of the Naval Aviation Transport Service (NATS) in Espiritu Santo during World War II. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

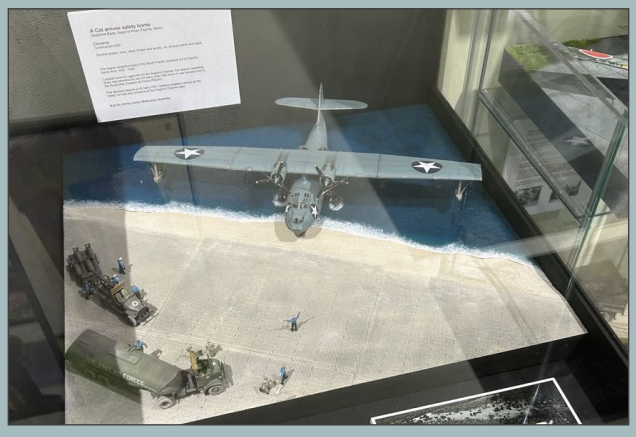
of the Fletcher-class battleship modified into the USS Strong, transported as carry-on luggage in a specially made freight box.

When Jimmy finally opened the shipping crates after months in storage, he was dismayed to find that every model had suffered some damage despite the secure packing. Most aircraft had collapsed landing gear, suggesting the container may have been jostled heavily during loading or unloading in Brisbane or Santo. Luckily, Jimmy had come prepared with tools, adhesives, scalpels, paints, and special tapes that could fix just about anything. After a few days of careful repairs, the models were looking as good as new.

Funnily enough, the largest diorama – depicting the Naval Air Transportation (NATS) jetty near what is now Beachfront Resort – arrived with only a tiny ammunition box out of place.

A C-47 about to be refuelled in one of the many revetments at Bomber Airfield No.2. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

All the dioramas portray locations at Base Button on Espiritu Santo, while those without bases represent aircraft or vehicles that were stationed there during World War II. While repairs were underway, Chairman Bradley Wood, Sam Sangul and Candy Siro built a custom display table for the three dioramas, keeping them safe from dust and curious fingers. The end result is stunning, showcasing each scene beautifully.



A US Navy PBY Catalina seaplane taxis up the 'ramp' for fuel and ordnance at the Segond Channel base. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

So what's next for Jimmy? Perhaps a scale model of the entire Base Button! That would be exciting – just don't tell Jimmy's wife.

Standing tall

Eighty-three years ago this month, Captain Elwood J. Euart gave his life rescuing his men from the sinking SS President Coolidge just off Espiritu Santo's east coast.

Of the 5,340 men and women aboard the former luxury liner, only two were lost after the ship struck two sea mines in the Segond Channel—Captain Euart and Fireman/ Watertender Robert W. Reid.

The association that oversees the museum, the Elwood J. Euart Association, was named in his honour after consultation with his family in the United States.

In recent weeks, we decided the poster created years ago to tell his story deserved a refresh to more fully recognise his heroic actions.

The new life-sized poster now stands proudly within the Coolidge Collection at the museum.

Artifacts impress Ambassador

We were delighted to welcome back Japanese Ambassador Mr. Naohisa Okuda, a keen supporter of our museum, during his recent visit to Luganville. While in town for a series of meetings, the Ambassador was guided around the museum by board member and tour guide Mayumi Green.

The Japanese Ambassador stands next to the new display of Espiritu Santo dioramas. Photo – Lemy Nacisse.

Mayumi introduced him to our latest displays, featuring posters, scale models, and a range of newly showcased artifacts. The Ambassador was particularly impressed by the museum's growth and the professionalism reflected in the new exhibits.

Thank you, Ambassador Okuda, for taking the time to visit us and see the progress firsthand – it was a pleasure to share our latest work with you.

Lemy Nacisse stands with the Japananese Ambassador in front of the USS Strong Memorial. Photo – Mayumi Green.

Mayumi Green explains to the Japanese Ambassador the history and the significance of the clay pots in the museum's new Kastom collection. Photo – Lemy Nacisse.

Honouring tradition

The South Pacific WWII Museum is proud to announce the opening of a remarkable new exhibit: a collection of rare Kastom pieces meticulously gathered over many years by Museum Chairman Bradley Wood. This collection not only showcases the richness of Espiritu Santo's cultural heritage but also serves as a heartfelt recognition of the local communities' vital support to the Allied war effort during the Pacific War.

The exhibit features an array of items that are increasingly rare, many of which cannot be found anywhere else today. It is the only Kastom collection currently on display on Espiritu Santo, offering visitors a unique window into the island's traditional craftsmanship and daily life.

The new South Pacific World War II Museum Kastom display in its new glass display cases, is part of a collection put together by Museum Chairman Bradley Wood. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

Highlights of the collection include:

- Vanuatu Stone Age Tools: Gathered over many years from across Espiritu Santo, these tools illustrate the skill and ingenuity of local craftspeople.

- Traditional Clay Pots: Traded by the mother of Chief Willie from Wunpuku Village on the far northwest coast of Espiritu Santo, these pots are believed to be among the last of their kind still made and used by local villages on the island.

- Rare Pigs' Tusks: Collected from communities throughout Espiritu Santo, Pentecost and Marlo, these tusks are not only rare but also culturally significant, reflecting local traditions of ceremony and adornment.

- Traditional Axe Grinding/Sharpening Stone: Found after flooding washed it from an embankment near a small village south of Tassiriki on the west coast, this stone is extraordinary for its five distinct cutting grooves, each designed for shaping stone tools in different ways – a testament to local ingenuity and craftsmanship.

Through this exhibit, the Museum celebrates the enduring legacy of Santo's communities, honouring their contribution during a pivotal time in history while preserving the island's unique cultural heritage. Visitors are invited to explore the collection and gain a deeper understanding of the island's Kastom traditions, many of which are vanishing in the modern era.

This collection is a rare opportunity to experience firsthand the artistry and cultural depth of Espiritu Santo and reflects the Museum's ongoing commitment to preserving both the history of the Pacific War and the living traditions of its people.

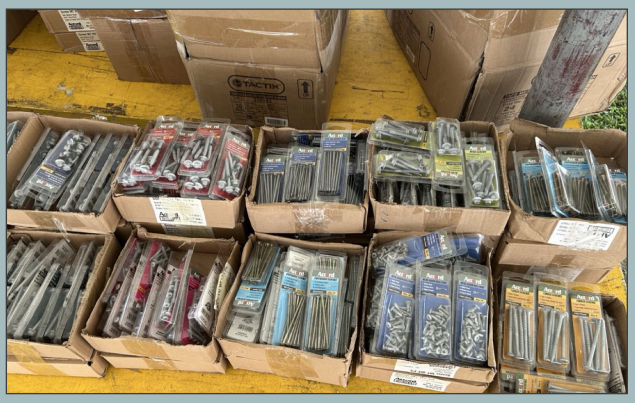
A big success despite the roadblocks

Museum's Yard Sale is over for another year

The South Pacific WWII Museum's annual Yard Sale took place in September, once again serving as our biggest fundraiser of the year. Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, the event brought in almost 650,000VT (around AUD $8,600) in sales.

Setting up always takes a couple of days, given the amount of products we have to transport and display. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

Bargain hunters enjoyed a wide variety of household goods, workshop tools, and building supplies, all offered at heavily discounted prices. While sales were a little lower than last year – thanks in part to uncooperative weather and the "wonderful" roadworks that closed the main road into Unity Park – our dedicated supporters still turned out to help make the day a success.



Fasteners of all types were popular again this year, particularly at the great prices on offer. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

Many locals have been avoiding town during the road upgrades, but those who came along helped ensure the Museum continues to thrive.

Every vatu raised will go directly toward the running of the Museum and the creation of new display materials for visitors to enjoy. We extend a heartfelt thank you to Leighton Shearer and the team at Santo Hardware for their outstanding assistance, and to Fill-The-Container in Melbourne, Australia, whose generous product donations once again stocked our tables and made this important fundraiser possible.

Day one was a little slow to get started thanks to the roadworks going on in the main street of Luganville. Photo – Marina Moli.

Frames of fame

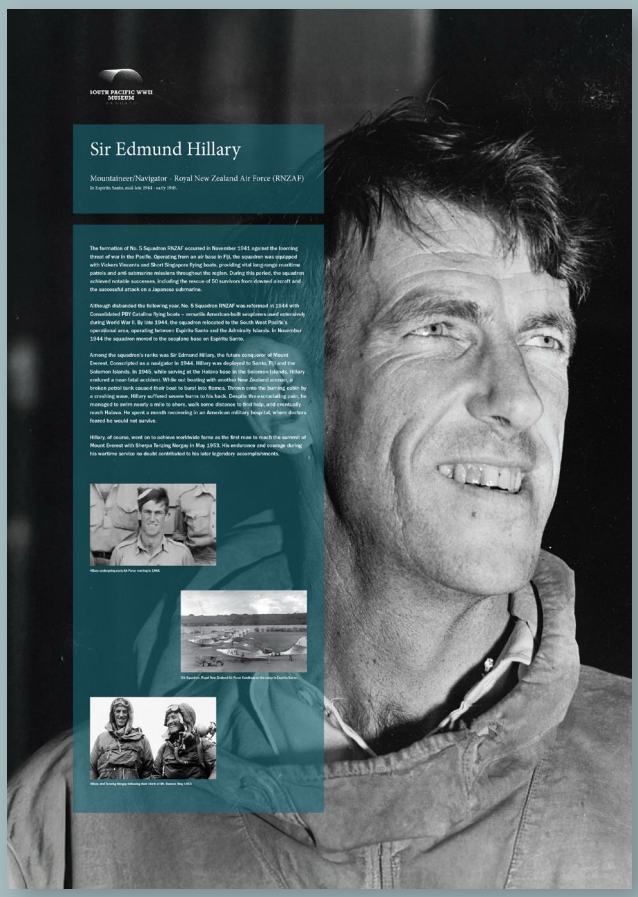
The South Pacific WWII Museum has seen quite a transformation over the past few weeks. The most striking change is the addition of seven new posters highlighting some remarkable figures who spent time at Base Button on Espiritu Santo during World War II.

The featured names include Pappy Boyington, Sir Edmund Hillary, Charles Lindbergh, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gene Roddenberry, John F. Kennedy, and a special tribute to author James Michener. Designed by Museum Project Manager Jimmy Carter, each poster tells the story of their time on the island and their role whilst stationed on the island during the Pacific War.

To showcase them, Museum Chairman Bradley Wood – working with local builders Sam Sangul and Candy Siro – constructed custom wall frames to hold the large-format displays. Each of the seven posters (which also includes James Michener on another wall), are featured below and over.

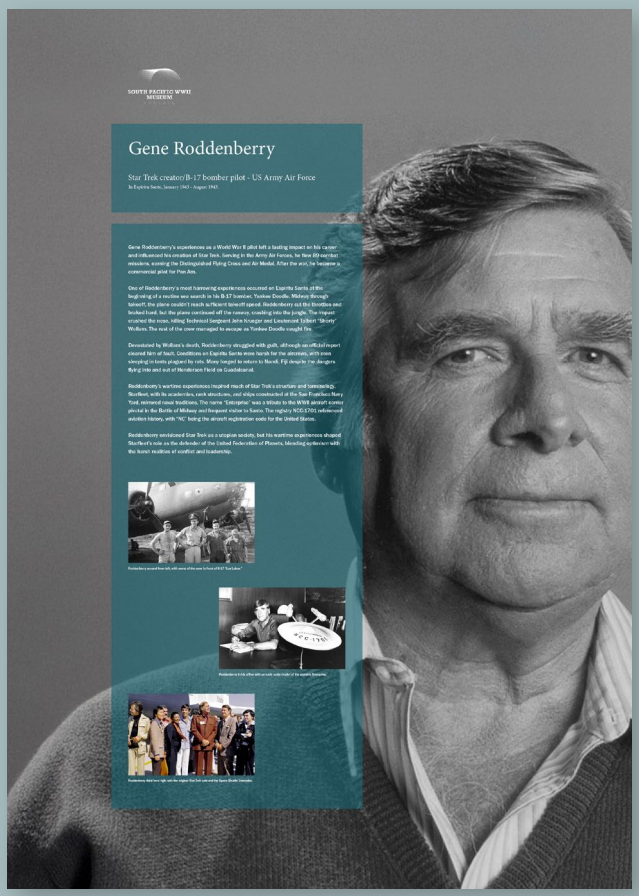
The finished posters mounted across the wall in the museum make an arresting sight when visitors first enter. Photo – Jimmy Carter.


SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
Gregory 'Pappy' Boyington
United States Marine Corps pilot/Medal of Honour recipient
In Espiritu Santo, March 1943
Gregory "Pappy" Boyington (4 December 1912 – 11 January 1988), was a famed United States Marine Corps fighter ace during World War II. His daring exploits and rugged individualism made him one of the war's most celebrated aviators.
He began his military career as a marine aviator with the Pacific fleet in 1941 but soon joined the "Flying Tigers" 23d American Volunteer Group of the Republic of China Air Force, fighting Japanese forces in Burma during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Despite his combat success, he left the Flying Tigers in April 1942 and returned to the U.S.
Rejoining the Marine Corps in September 1942, Boyington deployed to the South Pacific in early 1943, piloting the F4U Corsair fighter. On 14 August 1943, he took command of Marine Fighter Squadron VMF-214, the "Black Sheep." The squadron arrived at Turtle Bay Airfield in Espiritu Santo, later relocating to Guadalcanal's Henderson Airfield. Operating from rainswept fields with poor aircraft, Boyington and his men flew missions across the Solomon Islands.
Nicknamed "Pappy" for being 11 – a great deal older than most of his men – Boyington quickly earned an unforgiving reputation. During fierce combat in the Russell Islands, New Georgia and Bougainville New Britain/New Ireland areas, he shot down 14 enemy aircraft in 22 days. By 27 December 1943, his confirmed tally had reached 25.
On 9 January 1944, Boyington was shot down by Japanese "Zero" aircraft after downing a fighter. Rescued by a Japanese submarine, he spent over a year and a half as a prisoner of war before being released after Japan's surrender.
For his extraordinary service, Boyington received the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross, cementing his legacy as one of America's greatest wartime pilots.


SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
Sir Edmund Hillary
Mountaineer/Navigator · Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF)
In Espiritu Santo, mid-late 1943 - early 1945
The formation of No. 5 Squadron RNZAF occurred in November 1941, against the looming threat of war in the Pacific. Operating from an air base in Fiji, the squadron was equipped with Vickers Vincents and Short Singapore flying boats, providing vital long-range maritime patrols and anti-submarine reliability throughout the region. During this period, the squadron achieved notable successes, including the rescue of 50 survivors from downed aircraft and the successful attack on a Japanese submarine.
Although disbanded the following year, No. 5 Squadron RNZAF was reformed in 1944 with Consolidated PBY Catalina flying boats – versatile American-built seaplanes used extensively during World War II. By late 1944, the squadron relocated to the South West Pacific's operational area, operating between Espiritu Santo and the Admiralty Islands. In November 1944 the squadron moved to the seaplane base on Espiritu Santo.
Among the squadron's ranks was Sir Edmund Hillary, the future conqueror of Mount Everest. Conscripted as a navigator in 1944, Hillary was deployed to Santo, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. In 1945, while serving at the Halavo base in the Solomon Islands, Hillary endured a near-fatal accident. While out bowling with another New Zealand airman, a broken petrol tank caused their boat to burst into flames. Thrown onto the burning water by a crashing wave, Hillary suffered severe burns to his back. Despite the excruciating pain, he managed to swim nearly a mile to shore, walk some distance to find help, and eventually reach Malaya. He spent a month recovering in an American military hospital, where doctors feared he would not survive.
Hillary, of course, went on to achieve worldwide fame as the first man to reach the summit of Mount Everest with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay in May 1953. His endurance and courage during his wartime service no doubt contributed to his later legendary accomplishments.


SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
Charles Lindbergh
Aviator & military adviser/First to cross the Atlantic by plane
In Espiritu Santo, May-8 June 1944
Prior to World War II, aviator hero Charles Lindbergh was asked by the U.S. government to visit European countries to assess their military readiness. Convinced a war was inevitable, he advocated for neutrality through the America First Movement and even resigned his Air Corps commission. However, following Pearl Harbour, his attempts to rejoin the military were blocked by President Roosevelt, leaving him to work as a technical adviser for Henry Ford at Fort Willow Run and Vought Aircraft.
In 1944, Lindbergh travelled to the Pacific Theatre as a Vought Corsair technical representative, visiting various islands including Espiritu Santo, Guadalcanal, Bougainville, and Green Island. On 22 May 1944, he flew his first combat mission, escorting 18 aircraft to Rabaul. Over several months, he completed 50 combat missions, including close-boming and strafing Japanese targets in the Solomons and Dutch East Indies.
Lindbergh then joined the 475th Fighter Group in Hollandia, flying his first P-38 mission on 27 June 1944. His most significant contribution was developing a technique to increase the P-38's combat radius from 570 miles (917km) to over 700 miles (1125km) by adjusting engine settings to conserve fuel. This breakthrough allowed fighters to escort bombers on missions previously thought impossible and in some have exist, shorten the Pacific war.
On 28 July 1944, Lindbergh shot down a Japanese 'Sonia' aircraft over Cesare. General Kenney subsequently grounded him on 13 August to avoid unwanted attention, but Lindbergh's methods were already benefiting the 5th Air Force.
Lindbergh returned to the U.S. on 15 September 1944, his contributions proving crucial to extending the range of aircraft for missions in 1944 and early 1945. Despite his controversial political stance, his technical expertise and bravery earned him much respect from fellow pilots.


SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
Eleanor Roosevelt
Former United States First Lady/Human rights advocate
In Espiritu Santo, September 1943
In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) encouraged his wife, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, to embark on a goodwill tour of Australia and New Zealand. Eager to visit American servicemen and observe the war effort, she also hoped to see Guadalcanal, where U.S. forces had recently fought a fierce battle. Although FDR was reluctant to send her into active war zones, he agreed on the condition that her presence wouldn't disrupt military operations.
Departing in late August, Eleanor Roosevelt travelled over 23,000 miles (37,000 kilometres), visiting Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and seventeen smaller islands. Representing the National and serving as a Red Cross delegate, she tirelessly toured hospitals, military camps, Red Cross clubs, war factories, and civilian facilities, meeting an estimated 400,000 troops. Despite a gruelling schedule, she still found time to write her newspaper column 'My Day', describing the harsh realities of war.
Her visit to Guadalcanal was particularly impactful. Touring hospitals and cemeteries, she acknowledged that many soldiers would never return home. Observing their determination, she wrote of their readiness to face the enemy and the deep resentment left by Japanese atrocities.
Eleanor's empathy for servicemen was extraordinary. She often stopped to speak with troops bowding in the front, collecting names to contact their families later. Even her harshest critics, such as Admiral William F. Halsey, admitted her visit was invaluable, praising her ability to boost morale like no other civilian had.
In late September 1943, Eleanor visited Espiritu Santo, where she saw her son James's former Marine Raiders camps and the pier where Admiral Nimitz had awarded him a decoration. The experience profoundly moved her, further cementing her resolve to advocate for lasting peace after the war.


SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
Gene Roddenberry
Star Trek creator/B-17 bomber pilot - US Army Air Force
In Espiritu Santo, January 1943 - August 1943
Gene Roddenberry's experiences as a World War II pilot left a lasting impact on his career and influenced his creation of Star Trek. Serving in the Army Air Forces, he flew 89 combat missions, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal. After the war, he became a commercial pilot for Pan Am.
One of Roddenberry's most harrowing experiences occurred on Espiritu Santo, at the beginning of a routine sea search in his B-17 bomber, Yankee Doodle. Midway through takeoff, the plane couldn't reach sufficient takeoff speed. Roddenberry cut the throttles and hauled hard, but the plane careened off the runway, crashing into the jungle. The impact crushed the nose, killing Technical Sergeant John Krueger and Lieutenant Colbert "Shorty" Wulbern. The rest of the crew managed to escape as Yankee Doodle caught fire.
Devastated by Wulbern's death, Roddenberry struggled with guilt, although an official report cleared him of fault. Conditions on Espiritu Santo were harsh for the aircrews, with men sleeping in tents plagued by rats. Many longed to return to Naval, Fiji despite the dangers flying into and out of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal.
Roddenberry's wartime experiences inspired much of Star Trek's creation and lore/ship. Starfleet, with its academies, rank structures, and ships constructed at the San Francisco Navy Yard, mirrored naval traditions. The name "Enterprise" was a tribute to the WWII aircraft carrier pivotal in the Battle of Midway and frequent visitor to Santo. The registry NCC-1701 reflected aviation history, with "NC" being the aircraft registration code for the United States.
Roddenberry envisioned Star Trek as a utopian society, but his wartime experiences shaped Starfleet's role as the defender of the United Federation of Planets, blending optimism with the hard realities of conflict and leadership.


SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
President John F Kennedy
Former United States President/US Naval Reserve Lieutenant
In Espiritu Santo, March 1943
John F. Kennedy's naval service during World War II was a defining chapter of his life, showcasing both his courage and leadership. Despite chronic back issues, he joined the U.S. Naval Reserve in October 1941, initially serving with Naval Intelligence. Seeking combat role, he trained as Patrol Torpedo (PT) boats and took command of PT 101 before being transferred to Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron Two in the Solomon Islands in 1943.
On his way to the Solomon Islands, Kennedy spent a week on Espiritu Santo, most likely at the PT boat base. (But was located where the South Pacific WWII Museum stands today
Ultimately commanding PT-109, Kennedy was on patrol in Blackett Strait on the night of 1 August 1943, when a Japanese destroyer, the Amagiri, rammed the boat, killing two crew members. Displaying extraordinary courage, Kennedy rallied the survivors and led them to a nearly island, towing an injured sailor by a life jacket strap held between his teeth.
Over several days, Kennedy swam to other islands in search of help. They ordered ended when local islanders Biuku Gasa and Eroni Kumana alerted Allied forces to the location, leading to the crew's rescue.
For his heroism, Kennedy received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal and the Purple Heart. Despite his injuries, he briefly commanded PT-59 before being sent home for treatment in early 1944.
Kennedy often downplayed his heroism, famously saying, "It was involuntary; they sank my boat." But his wartime experiences left a profound impact, shaping his resilience, empathy, and dedication to public service — qualities that would later define his presidency when he was elected as the 35th President of the United States in 1960.

Anchored in accuracy

A model of the USS Strong has finally arrived at the South Pacific WWII Museum. It was an interesting project as no kit existed for the Strong. But that's where the fun starts. Project Manager and resident model builder Jimmy Carter takes up the story.

I'd wanted to build a model for the museum to really complete the USS Strong memorial. Building a model, almost brings the ship to life in a more tangible kind of way.

It was quite an undertaking but given I had the bare bones to begin with, it wasn't too crazy. Model kit company Trumpeter already produced a 1/200 scale

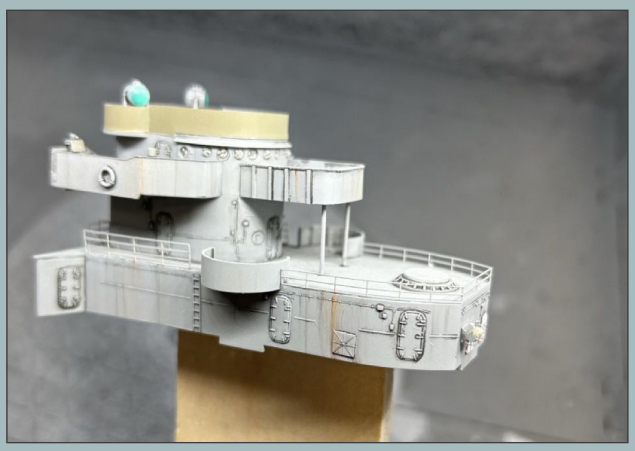
And so on a cold winter's day in Melbourne, the hull and non slip walkways on the deck are complete. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

model of USS Fletcher (which is the namesake of the Strong's class of destroyer).

So it was a case of comparing what was in the kit with the last known configuration of the Fletcher. A ton of reference pics were sourced, including some invaluable photographs from Tammi Johnson from Project USS Strong.

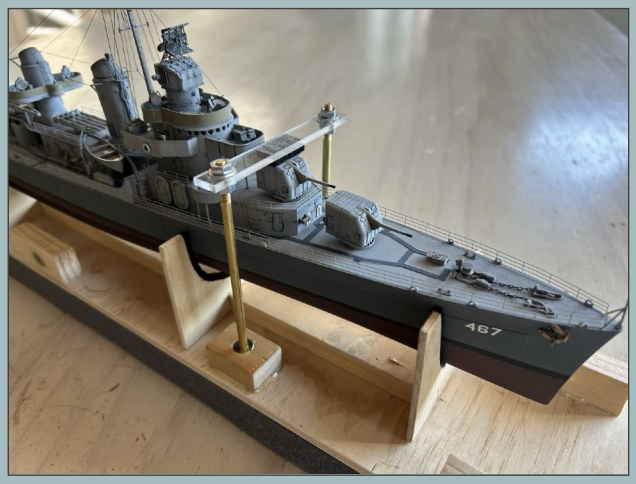
However, turning the Fletcher into the Strong meant quite a bit was added to the build.

- The Radar that came with the kit was incorrect for the Strong. A new one that was close was bought from Hong Kong and further modified.
- Bridge platform/superstructure in front of the bridge windows was non-existent. this was scratch built from sheet styrene plastic.



The modified ship's bridge superstructure undergoes some light rust stains and weathering. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

- Upper gun platform and funnel searchlight platform featured incorrect railing. Replaced with super-thin solid styrene to replicate canvas.
- Kit supplied hull numbers had shadows which was wrong for the period. New non-shadow rub-down numbers were ordered from the US.



The almost complete Strong is clamped into its custom shipping cradle for the journey to Vanuatu. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

- Kit supplied US flag was a decal and featured 50 stars not 48. A new 1/200 scale real fabric flag was sourced from the UK.

• Super fine 0.13mm antenna wires and rigging came from Spain.

• The stern Bofors gun was not included in the kit. The gun 'tub' had to be scratch built and new Bofors guns (for the stern and mid gun) were ordered from Russia.

The model of the USS Strong sits right next to the Strong memorial at the museum. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

• Kit supplied 20mm guns lacked any detail and some were missing that were included on the Strong. All new 3D resin printed guns were sourced from China.

• Main Fire Director supporting the radar, lacked detail. A new one was sourced from Hong Kong.

Various features such as navigation lights on the Antenna mast were also missing, some interception and jamming antennas were incorrect and life rafts were stored the wrong way around. Additionally, the two whale boats lacked a proper floor, so 0.25mm thick real timber was added to the boats.

Finally a timber base and brass supports were purchased and a small brass name plaque was created. These were left off until I arrived at the Museum where the Strong was fixed to its base.

It was a fun build, and at times frustrating, but the result I feel does the memorial proud.

The USS Strong finally on display in the South Pacific WWII Museum. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

From runway to roadway

This month, were comparing the old Bomber #3 airfield to how it is today. Luganville Airfield or Bomber #3 was the last of the bomber fields to be constructed on the island, and during the summer of 1945 the field reached its top capacity of approximately 650 planes, five hundred 500 officers and three thousand 3000 enlisted personnel.

Bomber #3 Airfield on Santo in its heyday during World War II. It was massive - there's no other word for it.

Not quite from the same altitude, but you get the idea. The right edge of the original runway is now the main road and you can see the left side of what was the runway behind the row of trees to the left. Even the old taxiway at a 45 degree angle to the left can be faintly seen.

Ghosts of the Sky

Espiritu Santo is home to an extraordinary number of World War II aircraft wrecks. From bombers and fighters to reconnaissance and transport planes, most of the aircraft that operated from the island's bases have left traces in the jungle or the surrounding ocean.

Some wrecks remain reasonably complete, with wings, cockpit, and engine still intact. The majority, however, were either destroyed on impact, deteriorated over time due to the tropical climate, or have been partially removed by warbird enthusiasts seeking parts for restoration projects in the USA, Australia, and other countries. Under Vanuatu's Cultural Heritage Act, all artifacts, including aircraft, are protected and cannot be removed from the country.

What started out as a wreck in Vanuatu, was recovered in 1989 and completely rebuilt into one of the rarest P-40 aircraft in the world. This was the aircraft at Temora Airshow in 2015. Photo – warbirdsonline.com.au

To help safeguard these historic sites, the South Pacific World War II Museum has created a database documenting as many aircraft wrecks as possible. This effort raises a difficult question: should wrecks remain in place for cultural and tourism purposes, gradually succumbing to nature? Should they be removed for restoration projects, which most Vanuatuans may never see? Or is there a middle ground—recovering the better-preserved aircraft to display in a controlled environment such as the South Pacific World War II Museum?

The answers are complex, but recent discoveries highlight why this work is so important. Two weeks ago, the Museum asked Luganville Ni-Vanuatu Bradley to investigate reports of an aircraft wreck in northern Espiritu Santo, sighted by locals Derick and Salomon. After a long journey and much treking, Bradley stayed overnight in a village before venturing into the jungle with local villagers.

Derick and Salomon share their story of the crashed aircraft when visiting the museum. Photo – Lemy Nacisse.

The effort was certainly worthwhile: not only did he locate the reported aircraft, but just 250 metres away, he was taken to a second wreck. While significant portions of both planes are missing, enough remains to identify them as crashed aircraft. Positively identifying them was our next challenge.

Machine guns are still to be found in one of the wings of the first crashed aircraft, along with live ammunition. Photo – Bradley.

(continued...)

A stunning shot of a Pratt & Whitney R-2800-8 aircraft engine with Hamilton Standard alloy blades. This was the second aircraft investigated by the search team. Photo – Bradley.

Intriguingly, locals reported another WWII wreck approximately three kilometres to the northeast, and a possible fourth around the same distance to the southeast. Once we have further information, these sites will be investigated at a later date.

Focusing on the first two planes, the Museum turned to Ewan Stevenson from Sealark Exploration in New Zealand for identification advice. Sealark is a non-profit organisation dedicated to surveying World War II wrecks in the Pacific. Ewan has an encyclopaedic knowledge of Santo's crashed aircraft and has assisted the US Defence Department's DPAA in recovering the remains of US service personnel, including on Santo. The Museum has previously collaborated with Sealark and shares its commitment to preserving Pacific WWII history.

Speaking about the wrecks, Ewan explained, "I can say that 99% of the crashes on Santo are simply training accidents. A handful ran out of fuel in transit, but most ended up in the sea. Pilots low on fuel were trained to make controlled water landings while still having power to control the aircraft."

Training accidents aside, Ewan noted the various causes behind these crashes: "Bad strafing runs, failed bomb runs, flying into mountains in clouds, uncontrolled spins, aerial collisions, young pilots experimenting with manoeuvres at low altitude, hitting the sea or trees during high-speed passes… a very sad loss of life."

Identification is possible, particularly through the radial engines, which are Pratt & Whitney R-2800-8

A US Marine Corps Corsair being worked on by ground crews at Turtle Bay Fighter Airfield on Espiritu Santo. The two aircraft that crashed are similar to this. Photo – US Archives.

(continued...)

models with Hamilton Standard alloy blades. Based on the wreckage's location and condition, Ewan believes these two aircraft were Corsairs that collided on 7 April 1944. They were piloted by Lt. Larry W. DeCamp and Lt. Harold M. Shafer from Marine Corps Squadron VMF-225. Ewan confirmed, "Shafer was killed and his body

This upper fuselage piece from just behind the cockpit immediately identifies the aircraft as a Vought Corsair. Photo – Bradley.

recovered. DeCamp walked out to a nearby beach – or possibly drifted down a river."

Much of the original aircraft is missing, including the tails, or empennages, which contained the Build Numbers (BuNos) 56263 and 56334. Ewan added, "Restoration shops in the USA and Australia are often vague about where original material comes from. It's tragic that so much archaeological information is removed from these sites."

The South Pacific World War II Museum will continue documenting these and other wrecks with the aim of keeping them in Vanuatu.

While many aircraft were removed in the 1980s and 1990s, according to Ewan, approximately 460 planes went down in and around the New Hebrides/Vanuatu during World War II. That leaves plenty still waiting to be discovered.

Bradley is congratulated by the Museum's Bradley – Chairman Bradley Wood on a successful trip up north. He even brought back some .50cal shells and some armoured cockpit glass from one of the Corsairs. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

Inspiring everyday heroes

The people of Vanuatu love a lot of sports – but you may not realise they have some serious practitioners of the cerebral sport of Chess.

One is Candidate Master (CM) Jeremy Ellison – who is off to Australia to compete in one of that country's premier tournaments. It's another milestone for the nation's growing chess scene.

Jayson Tasso and Jeremy Ellison – off to test their chess skills in Australia. Photo – Vanuatu Daily Post.

Joining Ellison on his international debut is Jayson Tasso, one of Vanuatu's brightest young talents and a fast-rising prospect for the national team.

Together, they will proudly represent Vanuatu at Australia's biggest prize-money chess tournament.

The event runs for five days in Toowoomba, Queensland, with both players entered in the Major Division. It's a golden opportunity to test their skills, gain valuable international experience, and prepare for the 2026 Chess Olympiad in Uzbekistan, now less than a year away.

VCF President Lesley Nompavos says the tournament is an exciting moment for Vanuatu chess.

He told the Vanuatu Daily Post:

"This is the first time Jayson will represent Vanuatu internationally, and it's a great chance for him to gain valuable experience," Nompavos said. "With his rapid improvement, he's a real contender for the next Olympiad squad."

Ellison is equally eager for the challenge, while the event—doubling as the Queensland Chess Championships—promises a strong field of Australia's finest.

But for Vanuatu chess, Toowoomba is more than just a tournament—it's the next step onto the international stage.

- **In chess terms, a Candidate Master is an official international title awarded to strong players, accompanied by what's called an Elo rating, a number that measures skill against other players—the higher the rating, the stronger the player.**

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 MUSEUM
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