SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
VANUATU

South Pacific WWII Museum

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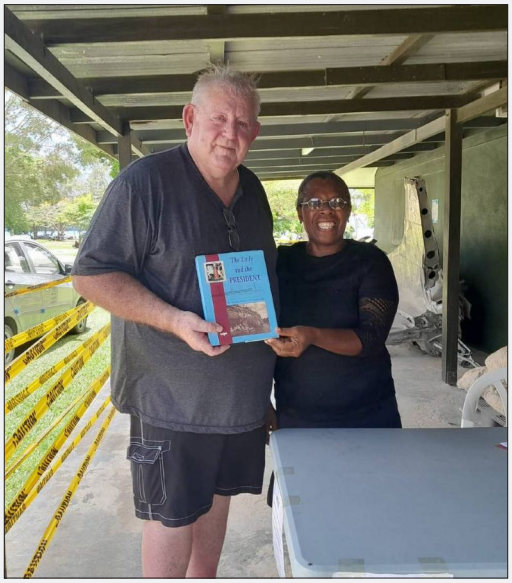
A wheel comes full circle

When Australian expat William Stevens visited the South Pacific WWII Museum in December last year, he brought with him a thoughtful gift — a signed copy of *The Lady and the President*, the definitive account of the loss of the SS President Coolidge. It was a fitting addition to the museum's growing library of reference books, given how deeply the story of the Coolidge is woven into the history of Espiritu Santo.

Fast forward ten months, and William once again found himself playing a part in the ship's continuing story. Browsing eBay one day from his home in Thailand, he came across an auction item that instantly caught his attention — and later, ours.



William Stevens presents Museum Support Officer Marina Moli with a copy of *The Lady and the President*, signed by the author. Photo – William Stevens.

The listing described "an elevating wheel removed from the wreck of the SS President Coolidge in 1976." The seller added that it had once been part of the ship's three-inch gun mounted on the starboard bow and even listed its exact dimensions: 29 centimetres in diameter, 7 centimetres thick, and weighing 6 kilograms. "The wheel is made of solid brass," the note read. "I leave the polishing to the new custodian." (continued...)

Intrigued, William reached out to the seller — a former diver from Queensland — and discovered the story behind it. The man had dived the Coolidge back in the mid-1970s, salvaging a handful of small artefacts before the wreck became a protected site. The wheel had remained in his personal collection ever since, displayed in his home in Indooroopilly, Brisbane.

A photo of the brass wheel taken from the SS President Coolidge from its ebay listing. Photo – ebay.

Though the piece would have made a striking addition to the museum's Coolidge exhibit, its expected sale price was beyond our budget. That's when William stepped in once again with an extraordinary gesture. He offered to bid on the item himself, and, if successful, donate it to the museum.

And successful he was.

Late last week, the brass wheel arrived safely in Melbourne, where it was received by Museum Project Manager Jimmy Carter. It will soon make the journey back to Santo — returning, in a sense, to the place where it began its story more than 80 years ago.

Once installed in the SS President Coolidge exhibit, the wheel will serve as a tangible link between the past and present — a small but powerful reminder of the ship that still rests just offshore, and of the enduring fascination it inspires in people around the world.

To William Stevens, we extend our heartfelt thanks for his remarkable generosity and continued support of the South Pacific WWII Museum. His kindness has quite literally helped bring a piece of history home.

Museum Project Manager Jimmy Carter with the wheel following its arrival in Melbourne. Photo – Jane Carter.

A US Navy 3-inch gun, the same as what was fitted to the SS President Coolidge. The wheel can be clearly seen in the centre of the image. Photo – Wikipedia.

One of the 3-inch guns on the wreck of the SS President Coolidge. The wheel may have come from this very gun. Photo – National Geographic.

The Dauntless mystery

From tragedy to discovery

When the Museum recovered the battered remains of a Douglas SBD Dauntless aircraft from Port Vila International Airport in July 2023, one big question remained — whose aircraft was it, and what had happened to it?

The museum's SBD-4 Dauntless soon after its arrival from Port Vila in 2023. Photo – Marina Moli.

Months of research and a few invaluable local memories have finally helped us piece together the story.

One of those memories belongs to Wallace Andre, who was a young boy living in a small coastal village on Efate's eastern shore during the Second World War. He remembers the day clearly, even after more than eighty years. A US dive bomber had been flying low over the village — a friendly gesture from an American pilot who had become friends with Wallace's father, a labour organiser working with US forces at nearby Havana Harbour.

A rare colour photo of a squadron of SBD Dauntless aircraft over Espiritu Santo during World War II. Photo – Life Magazine.

The pilot had promised to "fly over your house so you'll know it's me," Wallace recalls. Their home was easy to spot — the first in the village to have a corrugated iron roof that glinted in the tropical sun.

The rear fuselage and tail of the Dauntless as it was when the Museum recovered it from Port Vila International Airport. Photo – Bradley Wood.

On the appointed day, two Dauntless dive bombers took off from Takara Airfield in northern Efate, heading south along the coast in search of that shining rooftop. Wallace remembers the sound of their engines long before he saw them — one aircraft circling playfully overhead, the other skimming along the shoreline. Excited children ran to the beach, waving shirts and shouting as the planes dipped lower.

Then, in an unforgettable moment of wartime goodwill, one pilot dropped bundles of sweets from the cockpit. But the joy of the day turned suddenly to horror. As the Dauntless pulled up, its underside struck a tall tree at the edge of the village. Damaged and losing fuel,

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the pilot tried to turn back toward base but never made it. The aircraft crashed into the bush, bursting into flames.

A relative of Wallace's mother, who witnessed the crash, later told him how the two airmen were pulled from the burning wreck by a U.S. medical team. Both were badly injured. They were taken first to the military hospital at Takara, then transferred to Bellevue Hospital in Port Vila. One died en route; the other shortly after arrival.

The Dauntless near the Aero Club in Port Vila. After cyclones hit Port Vila, the wreck was thrown around and damaged further. Photo – Facebook.

For decades, the broken rear section of the aircraft's fuselage lay abandoned near the Port Vila Aero Club, tossed about by cyclones and forgotten by time.

In 2023, the South Pacific WWII Museum finally recovered what was left — a dented, stripped fragment of the once-proud Dauntless.

Now, thanks to research and community recollections like Wallace's, that relic is no longer a mystery but a tangible link to a moment of humanity, loss, and connection in Vanuatu's wartime history.

Another angle of the Dauntless wreck in Port Vila prior to recovery. Photo – Facebook.

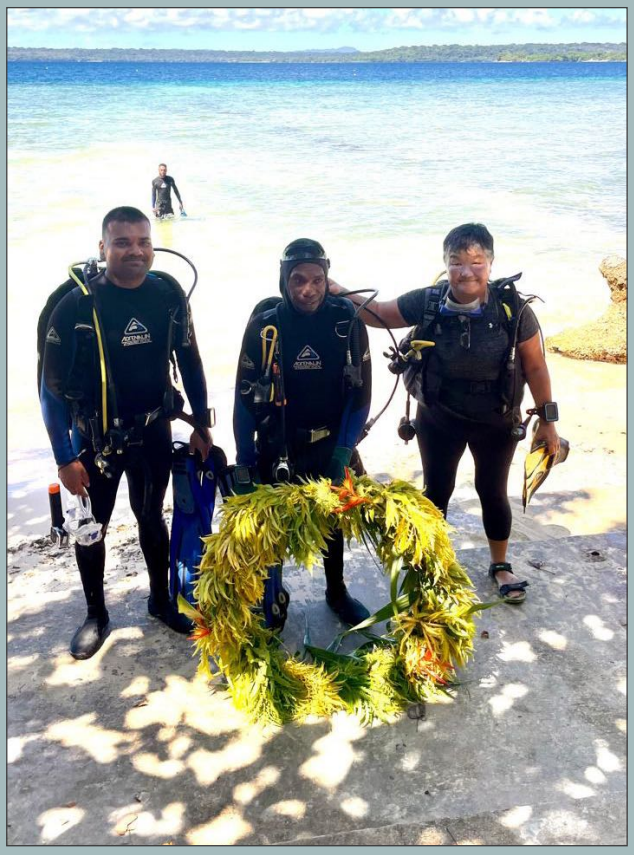
A Royal New Zealand Air Force Dauntless being worked on by ground crew on Espiritu Santo. Photo – Royal New Zealand Air Force.

A beautifully restored SBD-4 Dauntless in Yanks Air Museum in USA. This is what the Museum's Dauntless would have looked like prior to its crash. Photo – Yanks Air Museum.

Diving into history

26 October was the 83rd anniversary of the sinking of the SS President Coolidge off the southeast coast of Espiritu Santo.

To commemorate the event and remember the two men who died that morning, Museum board member and tour guide Mayumi Green made a special trip to the once luxury ocean liner.



Mayumi's client Rex (left), dive guide (Rex) centre and Mayumi stand with their underwater wreath prior to diving on the SS President Coolidge. Photo – Mayumi Green.

Accompanied by Rex, a client from the UK and dive guide from Pacific Dive - also named Rex - the team laid a specially created wreath on the bow of the ship. They then dived to 45 metres and left flowers near the spot where the remains of Captain Elwood J Euart were found.

Thank you Mayumi for taking the time to remember the bravery of Captain Euart and the life of Fireman Robert Reid who died in the initial explosion.

Mayumi makes her way to the bow of the SS President Coolidge with the wreath. Photo – Mayumi Green.

The 26 October is always a popular day for diving the SS President Coolidge, as it was the day that it sank off the coast of Espiritu Santo. Photo – Mayumi Green.

When books went to war

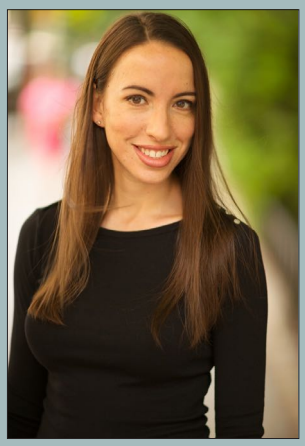
The stories that helped us win World War II

A book review by Tammi Johnson

I enjoy writing these reviews and this one ironically is a book about books. During World War II, the men and women serving overseas were hungry for news from home and stories that would help them escape the horrors of war in both the European and Pacific theatres.

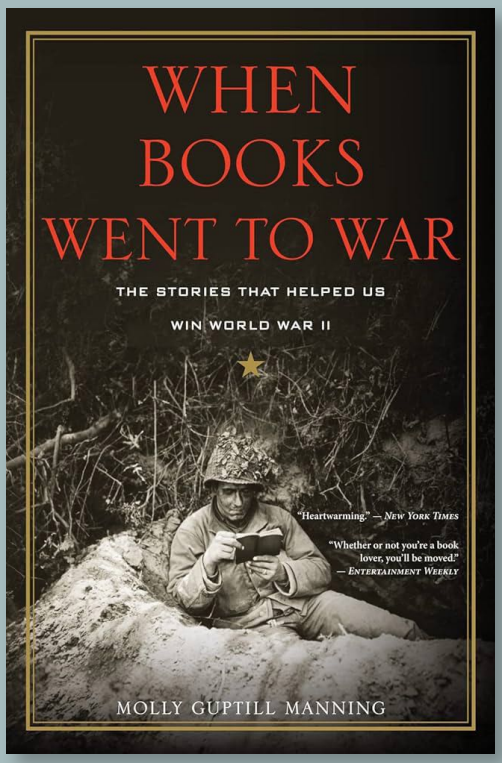
Librarians across America gathered books to ship to fill this need. Regular books though were big, hard backed, heavy and hard to ship overseas as well as being difficult for soldiers on the front to pack up and move when they were in the action. A solution came in the form of benevolent publishers and the War Department in 1943 working together to begin printing small paperback books that were easily shipped by the box full and could even fit in the back pocket of a pair of khaki pants for transport.

These were known as the Armed Services Editions, or ASEs. Such classics as The Great Gatsby, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn and Pal Joey were printed in either 5" x 4" or 6.5" by 4.5" sizes for easy carrying and trading. They became a hot commodity to the men and women eager for a short escape.



The author Molly Guptill Manning. Photo – Amazon.

A complete list of these ASE's is printed in the back of this book of 197 reading pages and includes a list of American and German authors whose books were banned or burned in Europe before the war. Libraries in Europe were decimated by the book burning in November of 1938, an event known as Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass (bookstores had their glass windows broken and were set on fire). An act principally against the Jewish population, it affected other residents of these countries and left libraries destroyed.



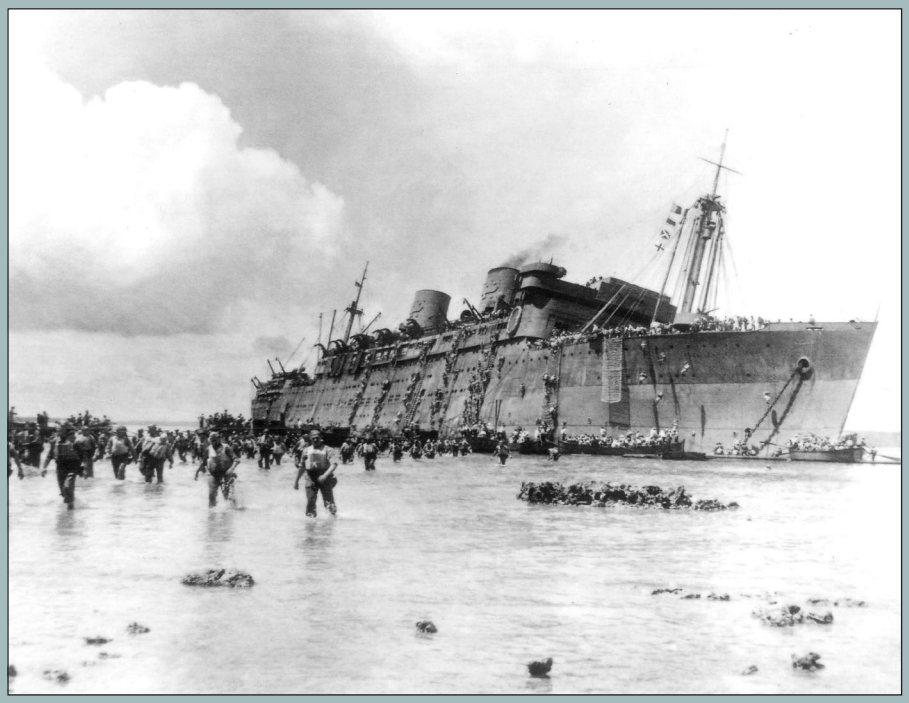
From the back of the book: "Soldiers read them while waiting to land at Normandy, in hellish trenches in the mists of battles in the Pacific, in field hospitals, and on long bombing flights." Collectors of war memorabilia can pick up copies of these little treasures on eBay and other online websites.

Molly does a great job detailing how the process started and in telling of the good that came from this effort by the War Department and publishers who cared. I highly recommend this book the New York Times calls, "Heartwarming."

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

Salvage, Souvenirs and Stewardship

The S.S. President Coolidge had already become legend long before divers began systematically visiting her decks. She sank in October 1942 after striking friendly mines, survived in local memory and slowly settled into the waters off Espiritu Santo. For more than two decades the wreck lay mostly undisturbed — an immense, quiet hulk beneath the tropics — until the late 1960s and 1970s, when a new kind of activity transformed her from wartime casualty into a scene of salvage and souvenir gathering.



One of the most famous photos of the SS President Coolidge, beached on the coast of Espiritu Santo. The bow was in water so shallow, the troops could literally walk ashore. Photo – Various.

The story of that era is a complicated one: part practical recovery, part adventurous diving, part opportunism — and, in retrospect, part cultural mistake. It is also a human story, populated by divers, photographers, salvors and islanders whose work and curiosity left indelible marks on the ship.

The earliest concerted salvage arrived with the arrival of salvage vessels such as the Pacific Seal in 1968–69. Crews aboard these ships undertook ambitious recoveries — notably the retrieval of the Coolidge's propellers — operations that required experienced scuba teams, heavy lifting equipment and meticulous underwater work. Photographers and underwater specialists rode with these salvage teams to document the effort; among them was Allan Power, whose photographs and later donations would become key records of that period. These early operations opened the wreck in ways that earlier, small-scale visits had not and signalled the start of broader attention to the Coolidge among the Australasian diving community.

From the early 1970s a wave of independent divers followed. Some were hobbyists, others commercial salvors; a few were skilled underwater archaeologists,

Legendary diver and the man that got tourism seriously started on Santo, Allan Power, stands with dive tanks on the beach in front of where the Coolidge is located. Photo – Various.

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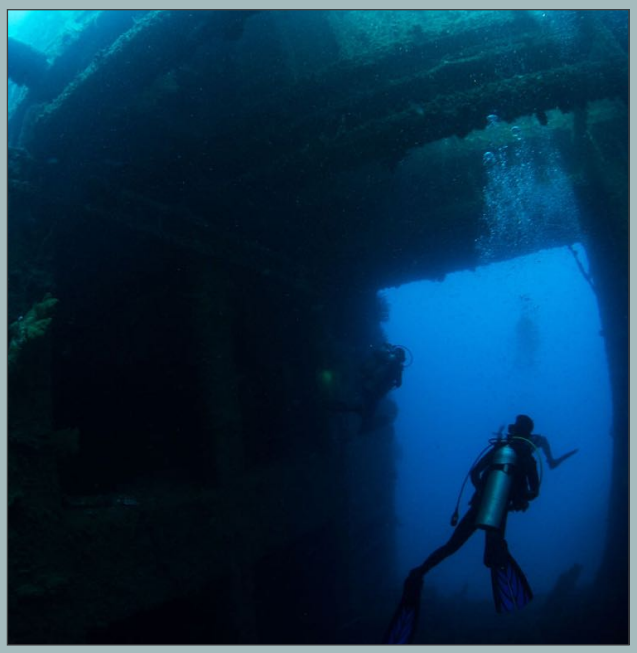


One of the many incredible accessible spaces that divers can explore on the wreck of the Coolidge. Photo – Heather Sutton/Diveplanit.

most were not. The wreck's large, accessible spaces — corridors, holds and open decks — made it attractive for both exploration and recovery. Brass fittings, nameplates, portholes and decorative panels were stripped and either sold locally, kept as trophies, or exported into private collections across Australia and New Zealand.

These small objects chart a strange afterlife for a vessel that is still a maritime grave: pieces scattered across living rooms and auction catalogues, surfacing occasionally to remind us of the wreck's altered history.

Featured on the cover of this edition of the newsletter, this brass wheel was removed from the Coolidge in the 1970s and is now finding its way back home again. Photo – ebay.

People matter in this story. Names that recur in local dive lore and museum records — Allan Power among them — are central to the Coolidge's modern record. Power arrived in Santo with salvage teams in the late 1960s and spent his life photographing and promoting the wreck; his collection is now part of local museum holdings, preserving an eyewitness record of salvage activity and early diving culture around the Coolidge. Others — often uncredited, sometimes anonymous — were the divers who risked depth, currents and decompression to cut into the ship's structure or winch up heavy parts. Their accounts, when they exist, are a mix of technical detail, local gossip and the thrill of underwater recovery.

Economics were always part of the motivation. Metals and fittings had value; recovery could be profitable for those who could organise it. But tropical climates

These are what was left of the Coolidge's bronze propellers, broken down and sold for scrap in the 1970s. Photo – Thierry Colardeau.

exacted a price. Salt, heat and biological attack degrade materials quickly; by the 1970s many parts had become more fragile than valuable. Salvage teams nonetheless retrieved whatever could be lifted, and the market for souvenirs — brass knobs, the ship's bell, a wheel or ventilator — met a ready audience among collectors and dive-shop customers in the region. Auctions and private sales later showed how widely the Coolidge's artifacts had spread, and how the wreck had entered a second life as source material for collectors rather than a site of memorial.

The environmental and ethical questions raised by the 1970s salvage era only sharpened with time.

As recreational diving matured and heritage thinking took hold globally, attitudes shifted away from taking artefacts as trophies and toward conserving wrecks in situ as historic sites. In the Coolidge's case, that meant an uneasy reckoning: large portions of the ship had been altered, some features lost, but many significant elements remained. Over ensuing decades, local museums, divers, and governments worked to gather displaced items, document the wreck properly, and legislate protections that would prevent unregulated salvage from continuing. The result is a mixed legacy: the Coolidge is simultaneously a changed wreck — scarred by earlier recovery — and a successfully protected dive destination whose remaining artefacts are being interpreted and, when possible, returned to public stewardship.

There are quieter, human resolutions to the salvage years too. Several items recovered during the 1970s later found their way back into museum collections or into hands that treated them as heritage rather than

Probably the most famous object to be preserved on the Coolidge. *The Lady* is a porcelain sculptural piece that hang over the fireplace in the Smoking Room on board the ship. A tradition with divers is to give The Lady a kiss. Photo – Jack Power/Pacific Dive.

trophies. Photographs and oral histories collected from those involved in the salvage operations now offer curators and historians a way to tell the fuller story: that of a wreck's afterlife as much as its sinking. Preserving these testimonies — and the provenance of objects moving from ship to salvor to shelf — helps the museum reconcile with an imperfect past and to inform future policy on underwater cultural heritage.

Finally, the 1970s salvage era offers a sharp lesson about stewardship. The Coolidge might have been better preserved had early visitors been guided by heritage principles rather than opportunism, but those decades also produced the people and institutions that later saved what remained. Divers who once took artefacts have in many cases become advocates for protection; salvors turned donors now work with

Probably the most important piece donated to the South Pacific WWII Museum. The Coolidge's bridge bell has found a new home back on the island from where it came. Photo – Niva Studios Luganville.

museums to return pieces, provide documentation, and support conservation. The story is not one of neat moral triumph, but of evolving awareness — and it is that evolution the museum aims to capture when we show Coolidge artifacts, recount salvage stories, and host visiting divers who come to learn rather than loot.

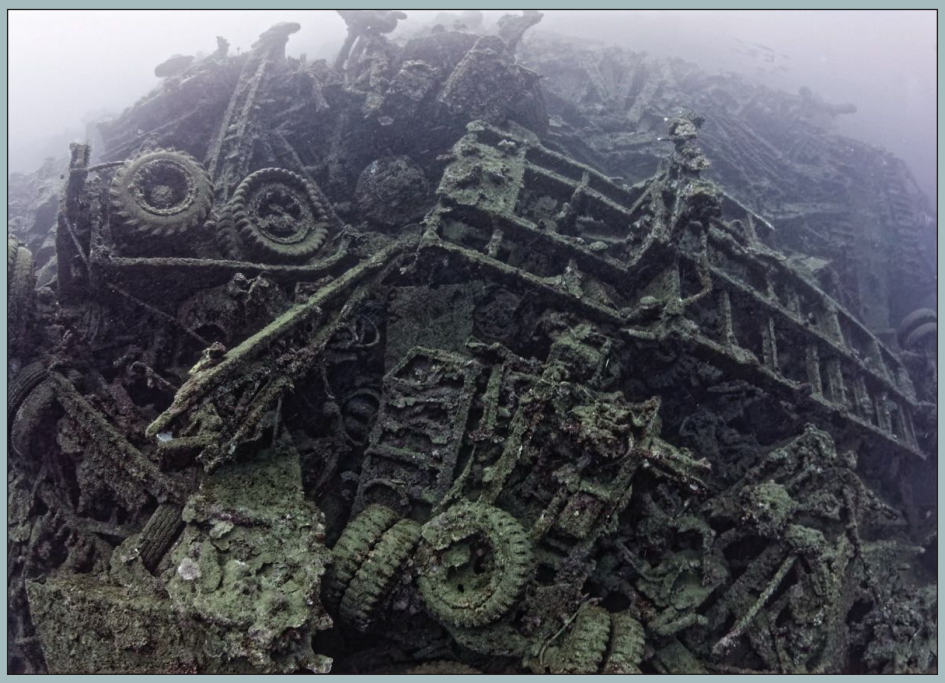
When you next dive the Coolidge — or stand on Santo's shores and look out across the water — consider how much of the wreck's present form is the result of those volatile salvage years.

The brass and porcelain in display cases, the photographs in local archives, and the stories told by older divers are all traces of a period when curiosity, profit and pioneering diving converged. The ship that now teaches us about wartime logistics, courage and loss was reshaped, piece by piece, by a different set of forces in the decades after the war. That afterlife is part of the Coolidge's history — messy, human, and worth remembering.

Million Dollar Point

When war left its shadow in the sea

On the northern coast of Espiritu Santo lies a place that continues to draw visitors like a magnet. Snorkellers drift among corroding trucks and bulldozers, beachcombers pick over metallic relics, and history enthusiasts stare out across turquoise water and wonder: how did this happen? That place is Million Dollar Point — once nothing more than a dumping ground for surplus U.S. military equipment at the end of the Pacific War.



An amazing underwater shot of some of the equipment dumped at Million Dollar Point, Espiritu Santo. Photo – Chris Hamilton - chphotographic.com

Today it's one of the most requested destinations among museum visitors, more so than almost any other site on the island. Yet the full story — how many vehicles were driven into the sea, how long it took, and how many men were involved — remains partly shrouded in mystery. Some details lie buried deep in U.S. archives, but even without them the broader picture tells a powerful story.

During the height of the Second World War, the U.S. military's vast Pacific operation had one overriding goal: get the greatest possible quantity of supplies, vehicles, ammunition, clothing and food out across the ocean to the forces pushing toward Japan. Bases sprang up across the region, including *Base Button* on Santo, transforming remote islands into vital logistics hubs. At its wartime peak, the U.S. Navy alone had material in the Pacific valued at more than two billion dollars. Then came victory — and with it, a logistical headache of historic proportions.

Overnight, the essential became expendable. The trucks and jeeps that had carried men to the front, the bulldozers that had carved runways from jungle, the warehouses packed with rations and uniforms — all were suddenly surplus. Ships at sea no longer had destinations. Bases became silent, their airstrips and roads deserted. The new priority was clear: bring the men home. What was left behind could be dealt with later.

Dealing with it, however, proved nearly impossible. The cost of returning everything to the United States far outweighed its value. Tropical heat, salt air and termites destroyed equipment faster than it could

Equipment like this on Santo was left to rust and deteriorate in the harsh tropical conditions. Photo – US Archives.

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It might be a poor quality photo, but it's the only known photograph of the Million Dollar Point dumping. Hopefully further research will unearth more photographs. Photo – Unknown source.

be inventoried. Vehicles rusted, tires perished, wiring corroded, and motors seized. On some islands, entire airfields and infrastructure had no conceivable civilian use. Many local economies were small, agricultural, and had little demand for heavy machinery or military hardware. Simply put, there was nowhere for it all to go.

And so, the sea became the solution.

At Espiritu Santo, the final phase of the massive postwar cleanup — known broadly as "Operation Roll-Up" — saw endless lines of equipment driven into the ocean, pushed by bulldozers and loaded trucks straight off the shore into the deep blue. What couldn't be sold, shipped, or stored was dumped. The name "Million Dollar Point" came from the staggering value of what went under — everything from jeeps and tractors to barges, cranes, and earthmovers. Witnesses spoke of days of dumping, of roaring engines disappearing beneath the waves, and of the eerie quiet that followed when it was all done.

The irony, of course, was that much of what was lost could have transformed local life for years to come. But to the U.S. military in 1946, the war was over, the cost of transport too great, and the Pacific base network already being wound down at speed. What happened at Santo was repeated across the region. In Guam, New Guinea, and the Philippines, similar "roll-ups" took place. Across the Pacific, vast stockpiles were declared surplus — in Manila alone, $80 million worth of property was written off, with barely a quarter sold. The sheer scale defied comprehension: billions of dollars in equipment, vehicles, aircraft and materials simply deemed no longer worth keeping.

Back home in the United States, the Navy alone declared more than two billion dollars of property surplus — including aircraft, ships, and contractor inventories. The process was unprecedented in scope and confusion. Each base had to catalogue its holdings, determine what to retain, what to reassign, and what

Part of the staggering amount of equipment stored in a yard on Santo during the war. Most of this equiment was driven into the sea at Million Dollar Point. Photo – US Archives.

(continued...)

to scrap. In the tropics, machinery corroded faster than clerks could count it. The Pacific had been the supply line of a global war, and now it was the world's largest warehouse of waste.

At Santo, the sea swallowed the surplus. And in doing so, it preserved it. Today, Million Dollar Point has become one of Vanuatu's most intriguing attractions — a blend of history, mystery, and natural beauty. Divers glide past rusting trucks, bulldozers, and barges blanketed in coral. Sunlight filters through clear water onto the skeletal remains of wartime machinery. For

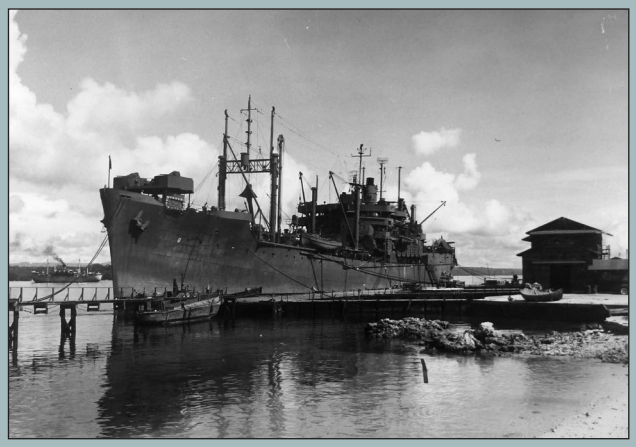
An excavator sitting on its caterpillar tracks at Million Dollar Point. Photo – Chris Hamilton - chphotographic.com

visitors, it's a surreal underwater museum, a glimpse into the abrupt end of the most extensive military supply operation in history.

Yet for historians, it's also a cautionary tale about the cost of war's aftermath — a visual reminder that the logistics of peace can be as complex as the logistics of conflict. The rusting hulks beneath the sea mark the moment the great machine of war ground to a halt, when victory turned valuable cargo into unwanted burden.

Million Dollar Point remains a hauntingly beautiful place, its coral-covered relics both tragic and fascinating. They stand as silent witnesses to the day the war ended and waste began — a time when progress was measured not in battles won, but in how quickly the machinery of war could be forgotten.

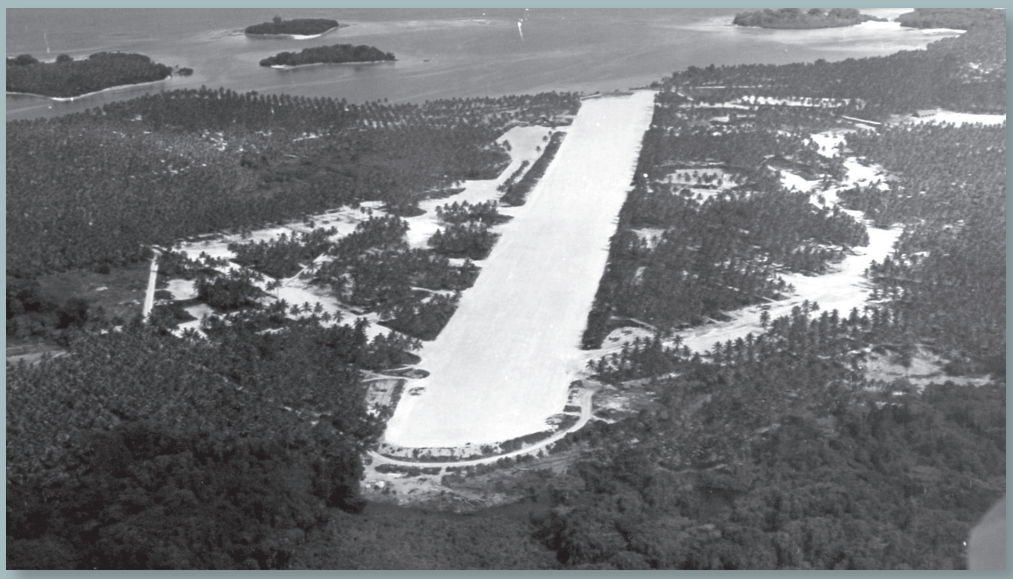
And so, as visitors wade into the calm blue waters and glimpse the ghostly shapes below, they're seeing more than the remnants of an army's departure. They're looking at the physical echo of a turning point in history — when the tide of war receded, and what it left behind became part of the Pacific itself.



Tens of thousands of tonnes of equipment arrived at Espiritu Santo from the United States on ships like this. This Liberty ship is unloading at the Pallikulo pontoon wharf on Pallikulo Peninsula. One of the many wharfs and jetties on Espiritu Santo during World War II. Photo – US Archives.

Then and now

Turtle Bay Airfield, or as it was officially known Fighter Airfield Number One – or unofficially Kirby Schussuer Airfield – was built in July 1942. Featuring a 6,000ft coral runway that was built in just 20 days, it served US Marine Corps, US Navy and Royal New Zealand Air Force units.



Turtle Bay Airfield's runway on 29 December 1943. This aerial photograph is looking east towards Turtle Bay. Photo – US Archives.

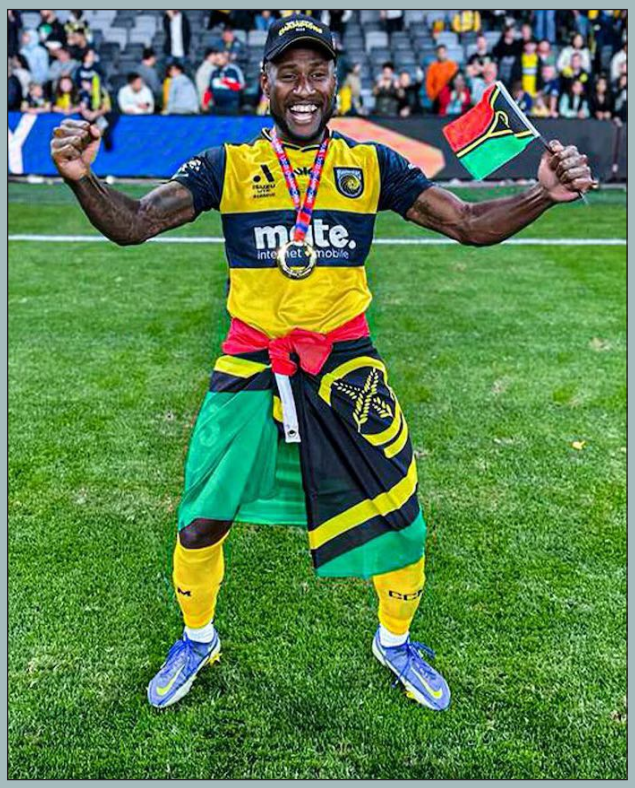
What's left of the airfield can be found up on the east coast highway just south of Turtle Bay Resort.

There's not much remaining, however you can still find the large compass rose near the highway entrance to Matevulu Blue Hole - one of Santo's famous crystal clear swimming holes.

This is the Turtle Bay runway as it was in 2019. The majority of the area is grown over and the taxiways and revetments have long gone making them difficult to find these days. The roads each side of the runway certainly help frame its location and the narrower track on the right side leads to Matevulu Blue Hole.

Inspiring everyday heroes

If “everyday hero” means someone who carries a nation quietly on their shoulders, Vanuatu’s football captain Brian Kaltak fits the description.



Brian Kaltak in his Central Coast Mariners kit. He now plays for Perth Glory. Photo – ABC Pacific.

Born in Erakor, Kaltak rose from local pitches to the A-League and the national team, and in doing so has become both an inspiration and a practical force for change back home.

In 2023 Kaltak was honoured by the Vanuatu presidency for his achievements abroad and his role in lifting the country’s profile.

This year he moved to Perth — a step that’s not just a career move but a platform: Kaltak has announced plans to launch a football academy in Western Australia with the aim of creating pathways for young Ni-Vanuatu talent to reach professional levels.

That ambition is quietly heroic — it channels success into opportunity, turning a personal triumph into a bridge for others.

Off the pitch he is known for humility: returning to community events, supporting youth teams, and speaking about the need for grassroots coaching and facilities.

For many islanders his story is proof that talent from a small Pacific nation can reach global stages — and that those who make it can bring others with them.

Brian Kaltak is the kind of local hero we put on our back page: not only celebrated for medals or contracts, but for the doors he opens and the quiet generosity that follows success.

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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