

**SOUTH PACIFIC WWII  
MUSEUM**  
VANUATU

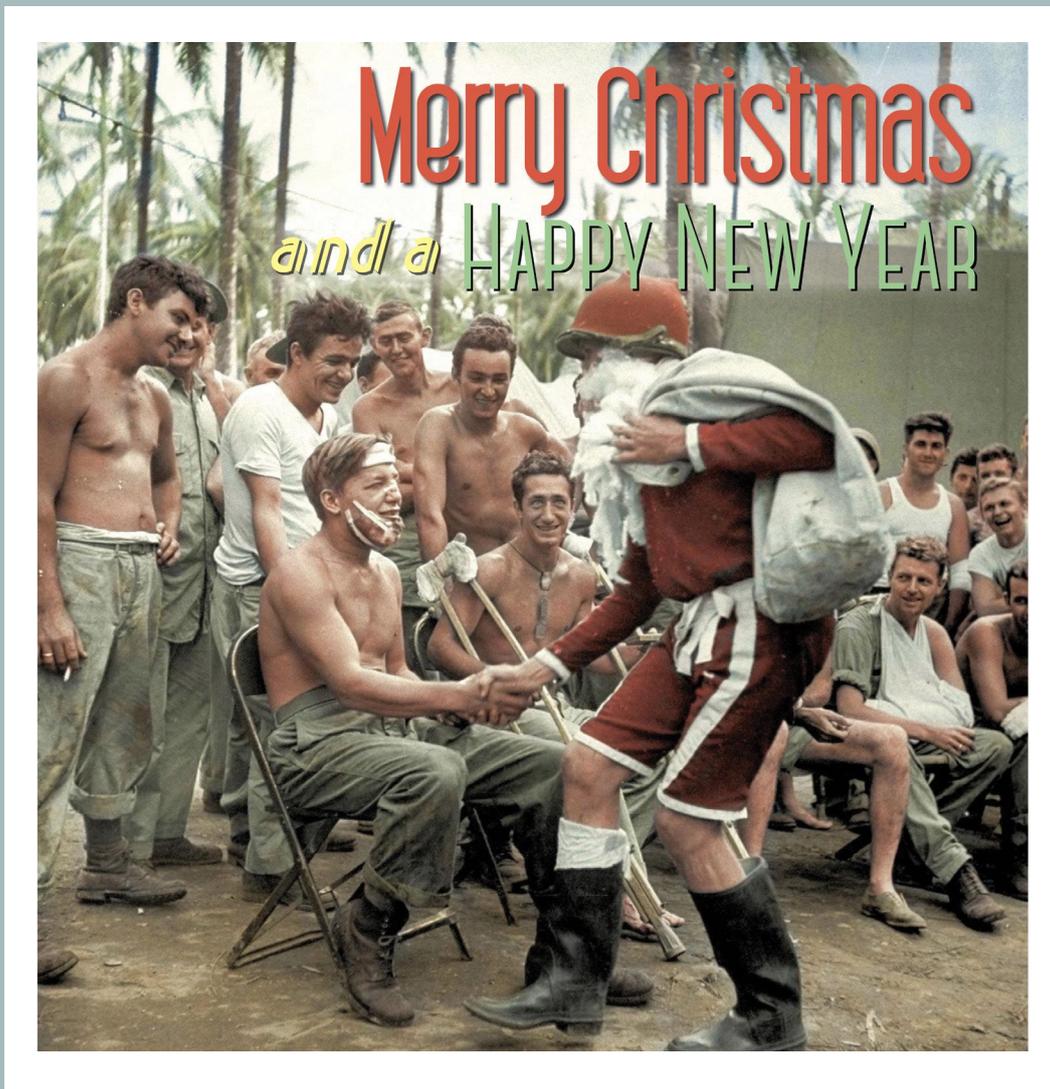
# South Pacific WWII Museum

Subscriber's newsletter

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December 10, 2025

Dear Friends,

As we reach the end of 2025, I would like to thank you for your continued support of the South Pacific World War II Museum and for the role you play in sustaining its work and purpose. This past year has been one of consolidation, reflection, and steady progress — important foundations for any organisation committed to long-term preservation and education.

The museum exists to safeguard the history of the South Pacific during World War II, and in 2025 we have continued to do that thoughtfully and responsibly. Our focus has been on strengthening the way we tell these stories, ensuring they are accurate, respectful, and accessible to visitors from Vanuatu and around the world.

I am continually encouraged by the way the museum brings people together. Throughout the year we have welcomed visitors from many countries, hosted school groups, and engaged with members of the local community who have strong personal and family connections to this history. The museum is not just a place to display artefacts; it is a place where stories are shared, questions are asked, and understanding is deepened.

I would like to acknowledge the dedication of our staff, volunteers, and Board members, who give their time and expertise so generously. I also extend sincere thanks to our sponsors, donors, members, and supporters whose contributions — financial, practical, and moral — enable the museum to operate and evolve. Your support underpins everything we do.

As we look ahead to 2026, we do so with cautious optimism and a clear sense of purpose. There is much still to be done, and many stories yet to be told, but we are confident that with your continued support, the museum will remain a trusted custodian of this important history.

On behalf of the Board, thank you for being part of the museum's journey. I wish you and your families a peaceful Christmas and all the very best for the year ahead.

Warm regards,

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

Bradley Wood  
Chairman  
South Pacific World War II Museum

# Christmas under palms

*Christmas in wartime was rarely what anyone imagined it would be. Far from home and surrounded by the machinery of war, servicemen in the South Pacific found themselves marking the season in unfamiliar ways. This story looks back to Espiritu Santo in December 1943, where Christmas arrived not with snow and silence, but with heat, hymns, shared meals, and small acts of kindness that carried enormous meaning. It is a reminder that even in the hardest circumstances, the spirit of Christmas endured.*

Christmas came quietly to Espiritu Santo in 1943.

There were no sleigh bells and no snow, no frosted windows or pine trees heavy with tinsel. Instead, Christmas arrived beneath swaying coconut palms,

would see it again. For many, this would be their first Christmas spent overseas. For some, it would be their last.

The war did not stop for Christmas, but it slowed, just enough to be felt.

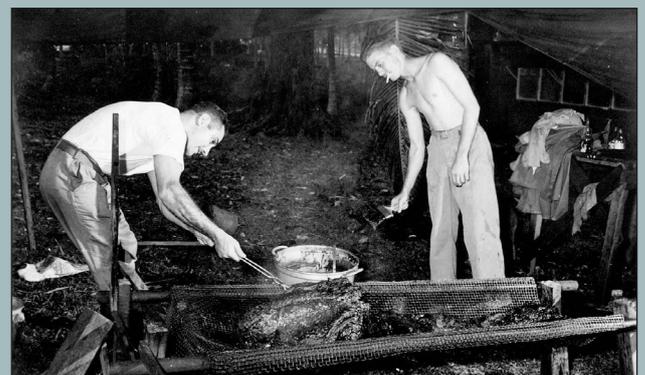


While not taken on Espiritu Santo, this photograph features men of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines celebrating Christmas under the sign 'Merry Christmas' made by fellow marines in Bougainville, 25 December 1943. Photo – US Archives.

On the morning of December 25, 1943, the island stirred early. Mess halls served slightly better breakfasts than usual — powdered eggs supplemented with tinned ham, sometimes even fruit saved for weeks for the occasion. In camps scattered from Luganville to the jungle airstrips inland, men pinned handmade decorations to tent poles and hung scraps of coloured cloth or signal flags wherever they could. Some units fashioned

carried on humid air scented with salt and woodsmoke, and marked not by silence but by the distant rumble of aircraft engines and the steady churn of ships moving through Second Channel.

By that second Christmas of the war in the South Pacific, Santo had become one of the busiest Allied bases anywhere in the Pacific. Tens of thousands of American servicemen were stationed on the island — airmen, Seabees, sailors, soldiers, doctors, mechanics — most of them far from home and unsure when they



Christmas lunch 'island style'. A roast of some description is prepared over an open fire on Santo. Photo – Facebook. (continued...)

Christmas trees from palm fronds or driftwood, decorating them with empty shell casings, bits of wire, and the occasional piece of ribbon rescued from a Red Cross parcel.

Church services were held in open-sided chapels and beneath tarpaulins stretched between trees. Chaplains spoke of peace and endurance, of families gathered half a world away, and of the strange



Standing in a Christmas chow line on Espiritu Santo during World War II on December 25. Photo – Unknown.

blessing of sharing hardship with strangers who had become brothers. Hymns drifted through the warm air, sometimes accompanied by a wheezing harmonium, sometimes sung a cappella, sometimes breaking down altogether as emotion caught in the throat.

Down in the waters off Santo, the wreck of the SS President Coolidge lay silent and dark. Just over a year earlier, the great troopship had struck American mines and slipped beneath the surface within sight of shore. By Christmas 1943 she had already become part of

the island's strange wartime landscape — avoided by boats, spoken of in low voices, and remembered by those who had survived her loss. That Christmas, her presence was felt as much as seen: a reminder of how close danger could come, even far from the front lines.

Hospitals on the island were full. Wounded men evacuated from fighting in the Solomons lay in rows beneath mosquito nets, some healing, some waiting. Nurses pinned paper stars to ward walls and organised small concerts, reading aloud Christmas messages sent by radio or printed in Stateside newspapers weeks out of date. For men unable to leave their beds, these gestures mattered deeply. A familiar carol, a joke, a nurse calling someone “son” — these were gifts beyond measure.



A new tie is just what a soldier needs while on guard duty on Santo on Christmas day. Photo – Facebook.

As evening approached, Santo changed again.

In camps and barracks, men gathered after dark, sitting on ammunition crates or the bare  
(continued..)

coral ground. Someone would usually produce a harmonica or guitar. Someone else would lead a song. Letters from home were read aloud, sometimes carefully, sometimes through tears. In the distance, flares glowed faintly over airfields where night patrols continued, reminders that the enemy had not taken the day off.



Comedian Joe Brown entertains the troops on Espiritu Santo during a Christmas USO performance in December 1943. Photo – Unknown.

Yet for a few hours, the war loosened its grip.

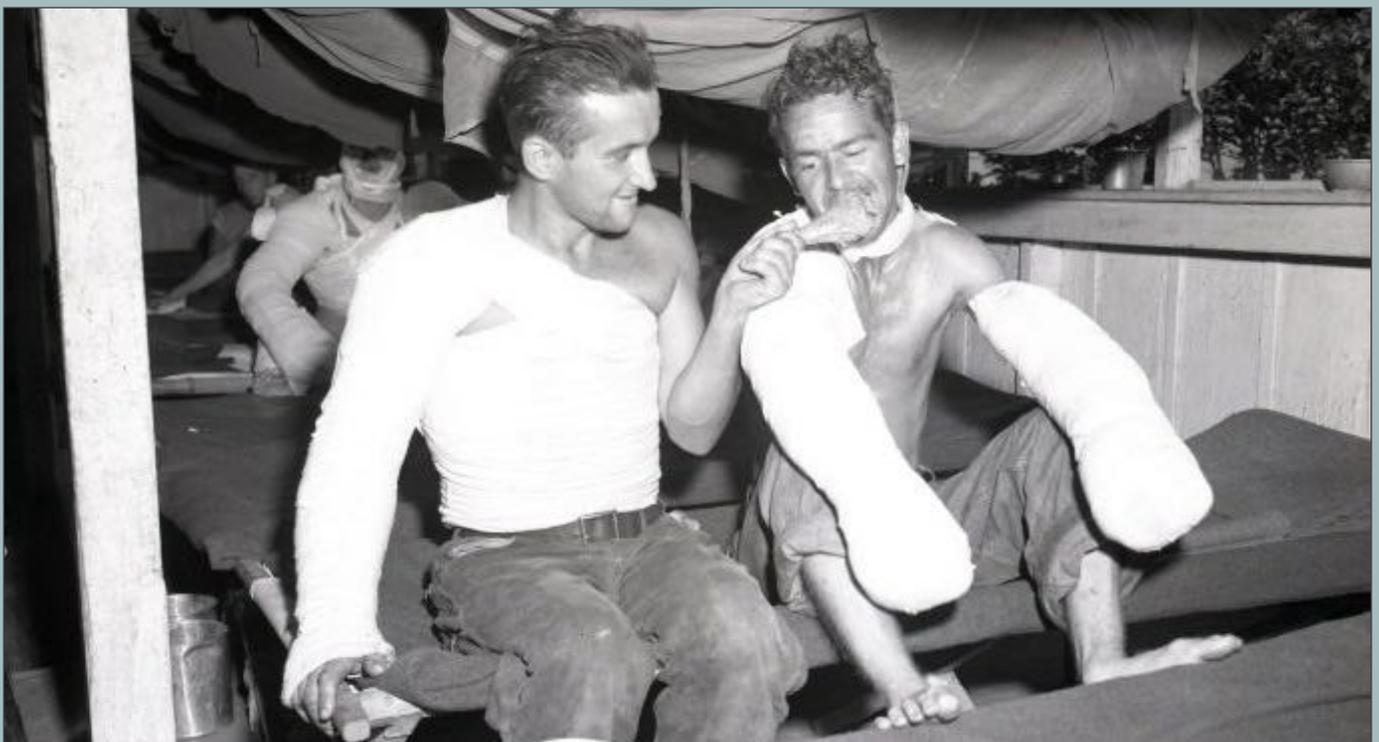
Islanders from nearby villages sometimes joined the celebrations, bringing food — yams, fish, coconuts

— and singing hymns of their own. Communication was halting, often improvised, but goodwill needed no translation. Shared meals were eaten beneath the stars, laughter rising where months earlier there had been only exhaustion.

For many men on Santo that Christmas, the hardest part was not the danger or the discomfort. It was the waiting. Waiting for orders. Waiting for news. Waiting for the war to end. Christmas sharpened that longing, but it also softened it, if only briefly, reminding them why they endured.

Years later, veterans would recall Christmas on Santo not for what it lacked, but for what it revealed. They remembered the heat and the insects, yes — but also the kindness of strangers, the ingenuity of handmade decorations, and the profound comfort of knowing they were not alone.

Christmas in the South Pacific was never what anyone expected. But on Espiritu Santo in 1943, amid warships and wrecks, jungle and coral, it was still Christmas — carried not by snow, but by hope.



What Christmas on Santo was all about. Soldiers in one of the islands five hospitals make the most of their predicament on Christmas day. Photo – Facebook.



Hi everyone,

As another year draws to a close, December offers a natural pause — a moment to look back, take stock, and reflect on what has been achieved together. For the South Pacific World War II Museum, 2025 has been a year of steady progress, thoughtful storytelling, and continued commitment to preserving the history of this remarkable place.

Throughout the year, our newsletters have explored both the well-known and the quietly forgotten stories of the South Pacific war. From the mechanics who kept aircraft flying at Base Button, to the medics who worked far from the front lines to entertainers who briefly lifted spirits in difficult times, these stories remind us that history is rarely made by one moment alone. It is shaped by countless individuals doing their jobs, often under challenging conditions, and often without recognition.

One of the great strengths of the museum is the community that surrounds it, and I would like to acknowledge several people and organisations who have supported us so generously this year. Our sincere thanks go once again to Leighton Shearer and the team at Santo Hardware for their continued practical support, which makes a real difference to our day-to-day operations. We are also deeply grateful to our Navara sponsors, Tropex Exports and Henry Cumines, whose ongoing generosity helps keep the museum doors open and our programs moving forward.

I would also like to extend a very special thank you to Kevin McCarthy. Kevin's writing has been a defining feature of our newsletters throughout 2025, bringing clarity, depth, and humanity to complex wartime stories. His ability to connect personal experience with broader history has enriched our understanding of the South Pacific war and has been consistently appreciated by our readers.

Equally important has been the contribution of Tammi Johnson, whose thoughtful and engaging book reviews have added another dimension to our newsletters this year. Tammi's selections and insights have encouraged many of us to explore new perspectives and voices, and her reviews have become a valued and anticipated part of each edition.

Of course, none of this would matter without our members, supporters, and visitors. Whether you've visited the museum in person, shared a story with us, donated an artefact, or simply taken the time to read and reflect on these newsletters, your support helps ensure that these histories are not lost. Every contribution, large or small, plays a part in preserving the legacy of those who served here during the war.

As we move into the Christmas season, this month's stories remind us that even in wartime, moments of humanity, generosity, and connection endured — sometimes quietly, sometimes unexpectedly. It feels fitting to end the year with those reflections.

On behalf of everyone involved with the museum, thank you for being part of our journey in 2025. We look forward to sharing more stories with you in the year ahead.

Warm regards,

Jimmy.

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**THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY**


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# Pacific tides turn fierce

On 26 December 1943, U.S. Marines of the 1st Marine Division went ashore under difficult conditions. Heavy seas complicated the landings, and almost immediately the environment proved as formidable as the enemy. Torrential rain turned the ground into deep mud, weapons jammed, supplies bogged down, and progress inland became exhausting and slow.

Japanese resistance was fierce but fragmented. Rather than massed counterattacks, defenders relied on entrenched positions, camouflage, and intimate knowledge of the terrain. Combat often occurred at close range, with visibility reduced to a few metres by jungle growth and driving rain. Disease and exhaustion took a heavy toll, sometimes rivalling combat casualties.

Despite these hardships, Allied forces steadily advanced. Within days, Marines secured the strategically important

airfields that had driven the operation in the first place. Japanese forces, outnumbered and increasingly isolated, withdrew westward, harassed by patrols and cut off from resupply.



A 1st Marine Division 75mm pack howitzer fires a round towards Japanese defenders of the strategic Cape Gloucester. Photo – US Archives.

In the final days of December 1943, while much of the world was marking Christmas in the shadow of war, Allied forces launched one of the Pacific campaign's most challenging — and often overlooked — operations: the landing at Cape Gloucester.

The operation formed part of the broader Allied strategy to isolate the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul without directly attacking it. Instead, American planners sought to seize key airfields and deny the enemy freedom of movement along New Britain's northern coast. Cape Gloucester, dominated by dense jungle, volcanic mud, and near-constant rain, was selected as the target.



A toast is drunk in coconut juice on the occasion of the 24th birthday of Sergeant Milan A. Cicak, USMC (centre) (continued..)

By January 1944, the campaign had largely achieved its objectives. Cape Gloucester never became a major base, but its capture helped tighten the Allied grip around Rabaul, contributing to the slow strangulation of one of Japan's most important Pacific strongholds.



Wounded sailors at the Battle of Cape Gloucester. Photo – Naval Heritage & History Command.

What makes Cape Gloucester particularly notable is not its scale, but its symbolism. It was a battle defined by endurance rather than dramatic breakthroughs — a reminder that much of the Pacific war was fought not only against a determined enemy, but against unforgiving environments that tested human limits.

For the men who fought there, Christmas 1943 passed in rain-soaked foxholes, far from home, marked by rationed meals and brief moments of camaraderie. Their experience reflects a broader truth of the Pacific war: that victory was often built through persistence in places few would remember, but which proved vital all the same.



"Nipper," a Japanese sentry dog, who voluntarily joined the Marines on Cape Gloucester, poses with Master Technical Sergeant George E. Ausman, who had been a Marine since 1926. Photo – Naval Heritage & History Command.



Marines and Coast Guardmen landing on Cape Gloucester, New Britain, circa 26 December 1943. An LVT-1 leads the way as some men carry stretchers and others push a jeep toward the beach. Photo – Naval Heritage & History Command.

# Indianapolis

## The true story of the worst sea disaster in U.S. naval history and the fifty-year fight to exonerate an innocent man

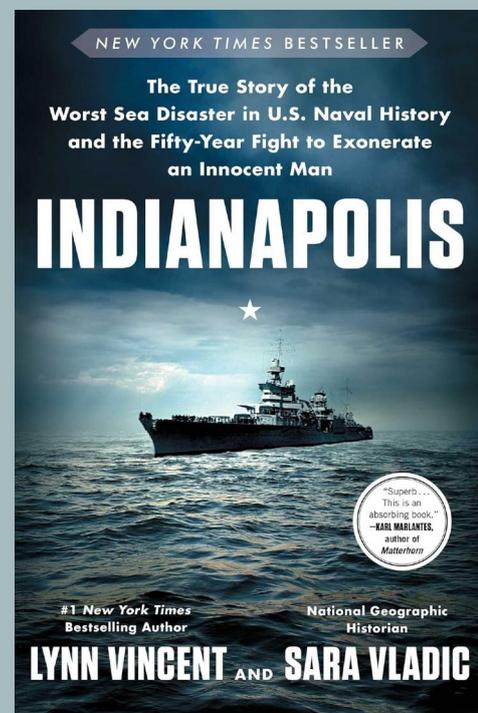
### A book review by Tammi Johnson

According to Google there are “tens of thousands, likely hundreds of thousands, of books” solely written about all aspects of WWII. Most of these books are written by men. That said, whenever possible I like to highlight the efforts of women who have written amazing books such as this one about the life and loss of the USS Indianapolis (CA-35). The “Indy” was the ship delivering the components of the first atomic bombs used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending the war in the Pacific Theatre.

Picked up at Guam and dropped off on Tinian Island, the crew of the ship had no clue as to the importance of their cargo. After being dropped off they were assembled and put on board a B-29 Superfortress named “Enola Gay” after the mother of the pilot, Paul Tibbets. History records what happened in Japan as the bomb named “Little Boy” hit Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, followed by “Fat Man” on 9 August in Nagasaki. Many miss what happened to the men of the ship, especially the Captain Charles McVay III, after the materials were dropped off on Tinian Island.

Information was available indicating the presence of Japanese submarines in the waters between Tinian and Guam on the return voyage. This information was not shared with Captain McVay. As the tropical nights were warm and uncomfortable on the ship and the return trip was anticipated to be uneventful, McVay allowed open portholes to ventilate the ship and ceased the zig-zag pattern of travel. The night was dark; it was impossible to see other vessels until the moon came out late into the voyage. Moonlight doomed the ship as it was spotted by a Japanese sub and sunk. Open portholes caused the ship to

sink quickly with 300 men still trapped inside. Out of over 1200 men only 316 survived, as no one went looking for the ship for days or seemed to care that it



did not return to port on time. McVay was blamed for the sinking, court martialed and subsequently ended his life years later. Sara and Lynn take on the case of McVay to exonerate a noble Navy man who was unaware of the danger facing them on the return.

An amazing story leading up to the signing of documents on board the USS Missouri (BB-63) on 2 September 1945.

Tammi Johnson  
December 2025

# Laughter, front and centre

In the vast machinery of World War II, Espiritu Santo became one of the South Pacific's great staging grounds — a place of airfields, supply depots, hospitals, and endless activity. Tens of thousands of Allied servicemen passed through the island, many spending months far from combat but living under the constant pressures of heat, monotony, and the



Benny's troupe. From left to right, June Bruner, Carole Landis, Jack Benny, Martha Tilton, and Larry Adler. Photo – carolelandis.net

knowledge that the war raged just over the horizon. In this environment, moments of relief mattered deeply. Few were as memorable as the arrival of Jack Benny and his USO troupe in August 1944, when one of America's most beloved entertainers brought laughter and music to Santo.

By mid-1944, USO entertainment units had become an established and essential part of military life in the Pacific. Coordinated through Army Special Services but appreciated equally by Navy, Marine, and Army personnel, these tours delivered professional performances to men stationed thousands of miles from home. Espiritu Santo saw an extraordinary range of visiting performers between 1943 and 1945, from small early units constrained by transport and accommodation to large, ambitious productions featuring internationally renowned artists. For many servicemen, however, the high point came in August 1944, when Bob Hope and Jack Benny appeared on the island within weeks of each other.

Bob Hope arrived first, on 10 August, drawing an audience of around 18,000 men, many of whom famously sat through mud and rain to see the show. Hope's troupe was warmly received, reinforcing his reputation as the unofficial comedian of the American serviceman. Yet when Jack Benny followed on 27 August, expectations were high — and, as it turned out, decisively exceeded.

Benny's troupe included some of the era's most popular performers. Carole Landis, whose beauty and warmth made her a favourite with troops across the Pacific, featured prominently, along with Martha Tilton, a well-known vocalist, and Larry Adler, whose harmonica performances added a distinctive musical element to the show. Together, they formed a polished, high-energy unit capable of holding the attention of enormous outdoor audiences under challenging conditions.



Renowned harmonica player Lawrence "Larry" Cecil Adler entertains troops in Germany in 1945. Photo – National WWII Museum.

Benny's performance took place on NAB Field one of the playing fields on Espiritu Santo. Open-air shows were the norm, allowing maximum attendance, and the logistics required to stage them were considerable. Sound systems, lighting, staging, and crowd (continued..)



Jack Benny entertaining the troops at a USO show in Port Moresby, New Guinea, 16 July 1944. Photo – Unknown.

control all had to be improvised and coordinated by military personnel, often with limited resources. In addition to the main performances, ward shows were staged in local hospitals, which at the time were crowded with casualties evacuated from the Marianas ensuring that even the wounded were not forgotten.

The crowd for the Jack Benny show was estimated at 15,000 men, about 3,000 fewer than those who had attended Hope's performance earlier in the month. Numbers, however, told only part of the story. Contemporary accounts make clear that the reaction to Benny's show was extraordinary. The island newspaper, *The Santonian*, recorded the occasion in glowing terms:

"Putting on a solid hour and twenty minutes of nothing short of terrific entertainment, and sprinkled just right with sparkling sugar, the Jack Benny show was hailed as the most outstanding USO Performance ever staged here... When the crowd of close to 20,000 who viewed the show Sunday Night at NAB Field started to leave after the final number, there was not one who did not agree that the performance that they just saw outshone the Hope unit which appeared here a few weeks back by leaps and bounds..."

Such praise was no small thing, particularly given Bob Hope's stature and popularity. That Benny's performance was remembered as surpassing even Hope's speaks to both the quality of the show and the mood of the audience that night. Benny's famously

precise comic timing, his self-mocking persona, and his ability to engage directly with the crowd translated exceptionally well to the outdoor setting. Jokes landed, musical numbers lifted spirits, and for an hour and twenty minutes the weight of war receded.

For many in the audience — Seabees, airmen, sailors, and soldiers — the show was more than entertainment. It was a reminder of home, of radio programs listened to before the war, of cinemas and theatres left behind. Seeing performers of such stature willing to travel to a remote Pacific base reinforced a powerful message: they had not been forgotten. In letters and recollections written years later, servicemen frequently cited USO shows as among the most vivid memories of time overseas.

Jack Benny's visit to Santo also highlighted the broader importance of USO entertainment in sustaining morale. Life on Santo could be physically easier than front-line combat zones, but it was often mentally draining — long hours of work, oppressive heat, tropical rain, and a sense of waiting. USO performances broke that routine,

Today, the sound of applause and laughter at NAB Field has long faded, but the memory of that August night in 1944 remains an important part of Santo's wartime story. Jack Benny's tour stands as a reminder that victory in the Pacific was supported not only by aircraft, ships, and supply chains, but by humour, music, and the simple human need for joy — even, and perhaps especially, in the midst of war.



Carole Landis autographs the cast of PFC Everett Stipe at the 25th Evac Hospital, Espiritu Santo, August 28, 1944. Photo – cinemascolars.com

# Then and now

In this edition we're comparing the Pallikulo Peninsula back in 1943 with how it looks today. The concrete slipways are still there as is the long concrete section of the jetty in the lower centre of frame. Unfortunately and somewhat controversially, all those

'piles' in the centre of today's photo are trees cut down by Chinese loggers who were hiding their haul in amongst the trees out on the peninsula.

During the war an enormous floating pontoon jetty was anchored to the concrete jetty. Cargo ships would unload aircraft spares and supplies that were then stored in a warehouse complex that was located towards the top of frame.

The road over the narrows was built by Navy Seabees. Prior to the arrival of the US Navy, the tip of the peninsula was actually an island.



U. S. Navy docks on Pallikulo Bay, Espiritu Santo. Enlarged about 22 diameters. Alt. 1000'; focal length 8.25" Looking south. 9 June 1943. Photo – US Archives.



The photo today with the rusted remains of barges and logs that have laid there too long to be useful to anyone. Photo – Google Earth.

# Wrenches of war

When the 29th Air Service Group arrived on Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides, they entered an environment far different from the orderly training grounds and airfields of the United States. The island, thick with jungle and dotted with sandy coves, would become a critical hub for the Allies in the South Pacific, yet the challenges they faced there tested every skill and ingenuity the group had acquired in its early years.

The journey to Santo was not without its difficulties. Part of the Group's equipment, loaded onto the USS Mormacsea, was delayed, and a second shipment aboard the USS Edison suffered storm damage near Fiji. Officers Lawrence Jarvis and John Scott, along with four enlisted men, were detailed to safeguard the equipment through the mishap. While some smaller supplies were lost to the storm, the salvaged larger



29th Air Service Group on Espiritu Santo. Photo – US Archives.

machinery eventually arrived at Santo on January 8, 1943. With their gear finally in place, the men could begin establishing a base in earnest.

Selecting the site for their camp was a process in itself. They chose a heavily wooded section in the southeastern part of the island, a peninsula extending

into the sea, not more than six miles wide at its centre. Clearing the thick jungle growth required extraordinary effort. Banyan trees with hanging vines and ubiquitous coconut palms provided both obstacles and, occasionally, shelter during Japanese air raids. Men took turns hauling coral and sand to prevent the work areas from becoming quagmires after tropical rains, while mess halls and showers were eventually constructed from empty fuel drums and palm logs, demonstrating the group's improvisational skill.

Despite the hard work, morale was a priority. Ingenious minds found ways to convert portable electrical generators into functional power sources for the headquarters and dispensary, while other innovations — such as attaching sprinkler heads to improvised platforms — made showers usable in the tropical climate. Small comforts, including steel cots and painted quarters, were painstakingly arranged, showing a commitment to both function and the well-being of personnel.

Once established, the 29th Air Service Group rapidly became indispensable to operations in the region.



29th Air Service Group welding shop under canvas on Santo. Rough and ready but they got the job done. Photo – US Archives. (continued...)



No matter what condition it was in and no matter what needed fixing, the 29th could find a way to get an aircraft back in the air. In this case a Bell Airacobra undergoing major repairs. Photo – US Archives.

The ordnance units, notably the 1637th and 1021st Ordnance Companies, undertook the meticulous assembly of vehicles and equipment. Without the aid of standard *Diamond T* wreckers, they improvised lifts and A-frame assemblies using tall trees and block-and-tackle systems to assemble GMC trucks and other heavy vehicles. Similarly, the maintenance shops — divided into Chassis and Heavy Units, Engine Overhaul, and Body and Fender departments — handled the repair and servicing of thousands of vehicles under challenging conditions. The group's efficiency and ingenuity allowed them to perform complex repairs, from transmission replacements to fabrication of brake shoes from wood when shortages arose.

Ordnance and supply operations were particularly critical. Parts and supply tents were established nearby, and innovative measures were taken to ensure the flow of vital materials. Four cargo trailers and a GMC truck were converted into

mobile parts carriers, ensuring rapid access and shipment readiness. The automotive section alone handled some 6,000 vehicle inspections and repairs, addressing transmissions, clutches, water pumps, bodies, radiators, oil seals, and even crankshafts, all while operating under tropical heat, humidity, and heavy rainfall.

Aircraft maintenance was equally crucial. The 29th worked in close coordination with the 13th Air Force, including bomber and fighter units stationed across the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands. They repaired battle-damaged planes, provided necessary parts, and even improvised solutions when standard supplies were unavailable. The work was unrelenting, as each aircraft returned to combat duty had a direct impact on the Allies' ability to challenge Japanese positions across the Pacific.

Espiritu Santo was not free from danger. "Washing Machine Charlie," a lone Japanese reconnaissance and harassment plane, regularly raided the island at night, dropping bombs that endangered personnel and equipment. On one particularly tense day, a Japanese bomber released a payload near the 1637th Ordnance Company bivouac area. One five-hundred-pound bomb penetrated deep coral without detonating, leaving a gaping hole.



Repairing the tail of a B-24 Liberator on Santo. Photo – US Archives.

(continued...)



The 29th Air Service Group's improvised wrecking crane lifts a pair of wings onto a 'low boy' truck. Photo – US Archives.

With no dedicated bomb disposal unit on Santo, Lt. Andrew Burke led a crew of volunteers from the 1021st Ordnance Company to defuse it. Working in shifts with pick and shovel, they dug twenty-nine feet through solid coral, ultimately discovering it was an armour-piercing bomb with a delayed fuse. The explosion, fortunately, did not produce catastrophic damage. This episode earned a special commendation from the Espiritu Santo Island Base Commander, Brigadier General B. C. Lockwood, underscoring the courage and ingenuity of the group's personnel.



B-24 Liberator bombers are lined up on Espiritu Santo for urgent repairs by the incredible 29th Air Service Group. Photo – US Archives.

Throughout their time on Santo, the 29th was also responsible for constructing and furnishing essential facilities, including the first set of living quarters for General Nathan F. Twining, the 13th Air Force Commander. Using local tropical hardwoods like

rose mahogany and teak, the 29th's craftsmen built the quarters quickly and to high standards, earning Twining's respect and appreciation. Over the following year, Twining relied heavily on the 29th to keep combat aircraft in top condition, often singling out elements of the group for their skill and efficiency in supplying, repairing, and maintaining planes critical to operations across the region.

Life on Santo required both endurance and ingenuity. Supply shortages, the constant threat of Japanese air attack, and the challenges of constructing a functioning air base from jungle and coral tested the men of the 29th daily. Yet, they persevered, not only meeting the operational needs of the 13th Air Force but often exceeding expectations, setting a standard of service and adaptability that became the hallmark of the unit.

By mid-1943, as the focus of the war shifted northward to Guadalcanal and beyond, the 29th Air Service Group prepared to leave Santo. Orders came through to pack, stencil, and ship all equipment, preparing for departure aboard the USAT Jane Adams. A rear echelon

remained temporarily to settle unfinished business, while the rest of the group journeyed toward new challenges, leaving behind a legacy of exceptional service and dedication that ensured Allied air operations in the South Pacific remained effective and sustained.

The history of the 29th Air Service Group on Espiritu Santo is a testament to the vital role played by support units in the Pacific War. While combat squadrons often garnered headlines, it was groups like the 29th that enabled the aircraft to fly, the engines to run,

and the missions to succeed. Their resourcefulness, courage, and determination under difficult conditions stand as a reminder that the successes of the Allied air campaign depended as much on those behind the lines as on those in the cockpit.

# Healing in Vila

When the story of World War II in the South Pacific is told, attention naturally gravitates toward airfields, naval bases, and the great movements of men and machines across the ocean. Yet behind the scenes, far from the drama of combat, medical units worked relentlessly to save lives and keep the Allied war effort moving forward. One such unit was the 48th Station

Staffed by doctors, nurses, technicians, and support personnel, the unit would eventually care for hundreds of patients suffering from battle wounds, tropical diseases, and the physical toll of service in the Pacific.

Among those who served with the 48th was First Lieutenant Lena R. Gelott, a nurse whose detailed



The 48th Station Hospital's first overseas posing was to New Caledonia. Not exactly state-of-the-art but the incredible medical staff made do. Photo – med-dept.com

Hospital, a U.S. Army medical facility that played a quiet but crucial role at Port Vila on Efate Island.

The 48th Station Hospital was activated in 1942 as part of the rapid expansion of the U.S. Army Medical Department in response to America's entry into the war. Like many station hospitals, it was designed to provide intermediate medical care — more substantial than frontline aid stations, but closer to the fighting than large general hospitals.

recollections offer a rare glimpse into the everyday reality of wartime medical service. In September 1942, Gelott reported for duty, beginning a journey that would carry her thousands of kilometres from home to the South Pacific. After a brief period of training and preparation in the United States, the hospital unit embarked aboard the USS Rochambeau in October 1942, crossing the Pacific under wartime conditions that

(continued..)

were cramped, uncomfortable, and often tense.

The unit's first overseas posting was New Caledonia, where personnel lived in tents and began adjusting to



View of Surgical Ward "12", New Caledonia. Picture taken around or after Christmas, December 1942. Photo – med-dept.com

the realities of tropical service. For many, this was their first exposure to the relentless heat, humidity, and insects of the Pacific. It was also where they began treating large numbers of patients, refining



Official photograph of the nurses of the 48th Station Hospital shortly after arrival on Efate Island. Photo – med-dept.com

procedures and improvising solutions when supplies or equipment were limited. This experience proved invaluable when the 48th was later reassigned farther north.



The 48th Station Hospital's open-air hospital Ward, New Caledonia. Photo – med-dept.com

In early 1943, the 48th Station Hospital was ordered to Efate, where Port Vila had become a major Allied base supporting operations throughout the Solomon Islands and beyond. The hospital was established near the town, close enough to transport routes to receive patients but far enough from combat to operate safely. Unlike permanent hospitals back home, the

facility consisted largely of wooden structures and tented wards, designed for ventilation rather than comfort.

Life at the hospital was demanding. Nurses and medical staff worked long shifts under difficult conditions, often treating dozens of patients each day. Many admissions were not battle casualties but men suffering from malaria, dengue fever, skin infections, and exhaustion — ailments that could be just as

debilitating as combat wounds. Preventive medicine was a constant concern, and staff themselves were not immune. Outbreaks of illness among the nurses occasionally forced others to work extended hours to

keep the hospital functioning.

Despite the hardships, the personnel of the 48th Station Hospital found ways to create moments of normalcy. Small gardens were planted near the wards, letters from home were read and reread, and friendships formed that would last long after the war ended. Patients often remembered not only the medical care they received, but the kindness and reassurance offered by nurses who understood how frightening isolation and illness could be so far from home.

Port Vila's importance as a regional hub meant the hospital saw a steady flow of patients moving through the medical evacuation chain. Some arrived directly from forward areas, while others were transferred onward to larger hospitals in New Zealand or Australia once they were stable. The 48th became an essential link in this system, ensuring that wounded and sick servicemen received timely, competent care during a critical phase of the Pacific campaign.



The nurses are all packed in New Caledonia and about to set off for Port Vila in January 1943. Photo – med-dept.com

One notable moment in the hospital's history came in September 1943, when Eleanor Roosevelt, touring Allied installations across the South Pacific, visited Port Vila. Her presence underscored the importance of the medical services operating there and provided a welcome morale boost to staff who often felt forgotten in the shadow of combat units.

By late 1943 and into 1944, as the focus of Allied operations shifted northward, personnel from the 48th Station Hospital were gradually reassigned or absorbed into other medical units. Their time on Efate had come to an end, but the impact of their work endured in the lives they saved and the suffering they eased.

Today, little physical evidence remains of the 48th



The official sign and entrance to the grounds of the 48th Station Hospital at Port Vila, Efate Island, February 1943. Photo – med-dept.com

Station Hospital at Port Vila. Yet its story is an important reminder that the war in the Pacific was fought not only with weapons, but with bandages, syringes, and quiet acts of compassion. The doctors and nurses who served on Efate represented a lesser-known front of the conflict — one defined by endurance, care, and an unwavering commitment to humanity amid the vast machinery of war.

# Inspiring everyday heroes

When Vanuatu referees Jarethy George and John Noumeta step onto the field in Samoa early next year, they will be carrying more than whistles and flags. They will be carrying the hopes and hard-earned progress of Vanuatu football.



Jarethy George (left) and John Noumeta will debut senior officiating in Samoa in January at the OFC Men's Champions League playoffs. Photo – [dailypost.vu/Supplied](https://dailypost.vu/)

Both men have been appointed to officiate matches at the OFC Men's Champions League playoffs in Apia — their first senior-level international appointments since becoming OFC-badged officials.

It is a significant moment, not only for the referees themselves, but for the development of officiating standards across the country.

Jarethy George, from the island of Emae, has steadily built his experience through regional tournaments, including officiating at the OFC Men's Under-16 Qualifying Tournament in Tonga in 2024. John Noumeta, from Tanna, also featured at that tournament as an assistant referee and has continued to progress through the officiating ranks. Together, their appointments reflect years of training, assessment, and commitment to the game.

The playoff tournament will be held at the Samoa Football HQ from January 31 to February 6, bringing together four clubs from across the Pacific, with a place in the 2026 OFC Men's Champions League in Fiji at stake.

For the Vanuatu Football Federation, these appointments represent a major milestone. They highlight the growing strength of referee development in Vanuatu and demonstrate that local officials can compete — and succeed — on the regional stage.

For Jarethy and John, it is a proud moment. For Vanuatu, it is another sign that talent from small islands continues to make its mark across the Pacific.

**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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