SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
VANUATU

South Pacific WWII Museum

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Swire offers museum funding grant

We are delighted to share some genuinely exciting news with our members and supporters.

The philanthropic trust of the Swire Group in London has offered the South Pacific WWII Museum a 50% matching grant of USD 22,000 toward the next stage of our development. If we can raise the corresponding USD 22,000, Swire will match it dollar for dollar — unlocking a total of USD 44,000 for essential renovation works.

For a community museum on Espiritu Santo, this is a significant vote of confidence.

The funding is intended to support the creation of improved research and library space, additional exhibit storage, and upgraded display areas — practical, behind-the-scenes infrastructure that will strengthen everything we do. These improvements may not always be the most visible to visitors, but they are fundamental to preserving artefacts, supporting researchers, and presenting Santo's extraordinary wartime story to the highest possible standard.

The South Pacific WWII Museum has been working with KD Construction to obtain a full quotation for the proposed works. Their costing has given us a clear and professional framework from which to move forward. Swire's offer is based on 50% of that quoted amount — a strong and tangible commitment.

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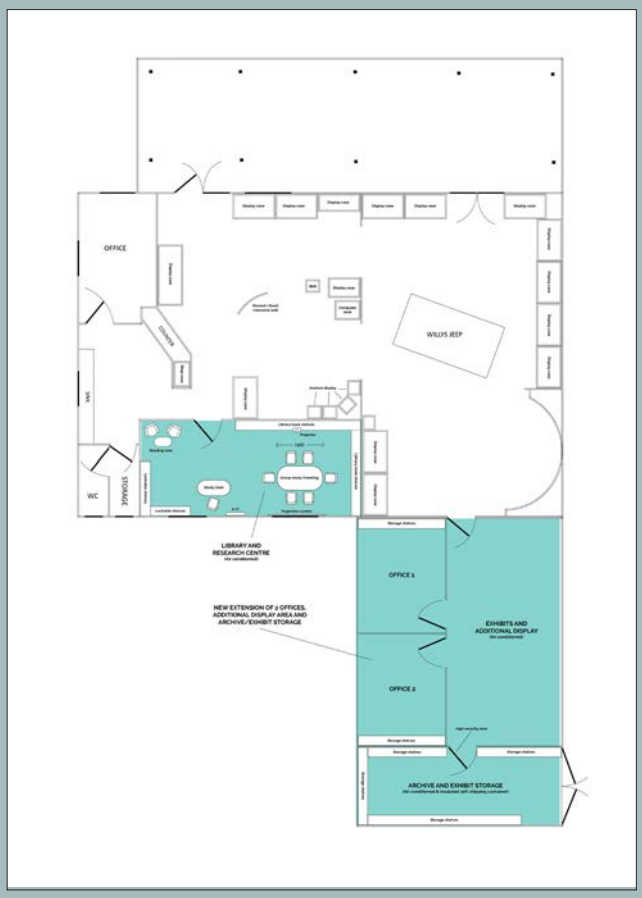
What makes this opportunity even more encouraging is what it represents beyond the numbers. Matching grants are designed to create momentum. They encourage community participation and ensure that philanthropic funding works in partnership with local effort. In short, they reward initiative.



A plan of the new library/research centre is shown in green on the left and the new storage and display areas are on the right.

Our Board has already begun exploring ways to maximise the impact of this support.

Santo has always been a place where community spirit runs deep. We are confident that alongside cash fundraising, we will be able to draw on in-kind support from local businesses and skilled tradespeople — further strengthening the project and embedding it firmly within the community it serves.

This is precisely the kind of partnership model that builds sustainable institutions. Swire's generosity provides the catalyst; our supporters provide the energy; together, we create something of lasting value.

Museum Chairman Bradley Wood and Project Manager Jimmy Carter show Sam Swire (second from left) and Geoff Cundle, Chairman of John Swire and Sons, Australia (right) around the museum back in September 2025. Photo – Lemy Nacisse.

For the South Pacific WWII Museum — which began as a modest mini-museum and has steadily grown into Luganville's number one tourist destination — this moment feels both affirming and forward-looking. It signals that respected international organisations recognise the importance of preserving and presenting the New Hebrides' pivotal role in the Pacific War.

There is still work to do. We must now raise our portion of the funds and demonstrate that this community stands firmly behind its museum. But we do so with renewed confidence and gratitude.

We extend our sincere thanks to Swire for their belief in our mission. Opportunities like this do not come along every day, and we intend to make the very most of it.

The next chapter of the Museum's development is within reach — and we look forward to sharing it with you.

MATCHED DONATION APPEAL

PLEASE HELP US REALISE OUR GOAL OF REACHING **$22,000** IN MATCHED DONATIONS

★

Head to the museum's website at:
southpacificwwiimuseum.com/donate

Donations can be made by PayPal or credit card

Valour comes home

In July 2024, when the Museum dedicated its memorial to the destroyer USS Strong, it was a tribute to courage, sacrifice and survival. This year, that memorial has been made even more personal.

Ross Brennan has generously donated his father's Purple Heart medal — awarded to Lieutenant (jg) Keith Norman Sherlie — ensuring it will be preserved as part of the USS Strong story here on Santo. It is a deeply moving addition. Medals are never just metal and ribbon; they carry memory, sacrifice and the weight of lived experience.

Keith Sherlie's Purple Heart medal that will be included in the USS Strong memorial upon arrival at the museum. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

Keith Sherlie's war began, like that of so many young Americans, on December 7, 1941. A senior at the University of Washington when news broke of the attack on Pearl Harbor, he immediately enlisted in the U.S. Navy, requesting service in the Supply Corps. After training at the Navy Supply School, then housed at Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, he was posted to the Pacific.

In January 1943 he joined the Strong at Segond Channel, Espiritu Santo, in what was then the New Hebrides. Boarding the destroyer by scrambling over her fantail — no ladder provided — he reported aboard as supply officer and paymaster. He quickly learned two urgent facts: the crew had not been paid for some time, and the ship was entirely out of toilet paper. Through a little naval "cumshaw" and a nocturnal expedition up a nearby river, Sherlie secured a hidden cache of supplies — an early indication of his determination to look after his shipmates.

Ensign Keith Sherlie, USS Strong DD 467.
Photo – projectuss-strongdd467.com

By mid-1943, the Strong was operating in the Solomon Islands as part of aggressive night bombardments designed to neutralise Japanese positions around New Georgia and Kolombangara. The work was dangerous, relentless and exhausting. Night after night, the crew manned battle stations, firing into darkness and waiting for the inevitable reply.

On 4 July 1943 — as Independence Day was being celebrated back home — the Strong took part in another bombardment mission in Kula Gulf. Shortly before midnight, after less than half an hour of firing, the order came to withdraw. Moments later, a Japanese torpedo struck.

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The blast was catastrophic. The destroyer's keel was broken; water poured in. Amid the chaos, Sherlie made a decision that would later prove invaluable. Realising the ship might be lost, he ran to his office, seized the payroll records he had been updating that very day, sealed them inside a waterproof covering and placed them inside his shirt before going over the side into the sea.

USS Strong during a mail transfer at sea. One of the last known photographs of the ship prior to its sinking.
Photo – projectuss-strongdd467.com

In the water, he turned immediately to others. He removed a drowning sailor's helmet, secured life belts around men without flotation, and attempted to comfort the wounded. Around him, the Strong was breaking apart. Depth charges detonated beneath the surface as the ship went down, concussive blasts rippling through the dark water. Japanese shore batteries continued shelling the area, illuminating the night with star shells.

Sherlie and a small group of sailors swam for hours against the current, determined not to drift toward enemy-held shores. Oil from the sinking ship coated their bodies. Exhaustion set in. Eventually they came upon a float net carrying the injured captain, Commander Joseph H. Wellings, and a signalman. Clinging together in the darkness, they waited.

Their rescue came in the form of the destroyer USS Gwin. A single working flashlight — carried by Machinist Mate Melvin Dubard — enabled the correct recognition signal to be sent. Lines were thrown, and the survivors were hauled aboard. For Sherlie, stepping under a hot shower as the Gwin's guns fired back at Japanese batteries was the first moment the reality of survival set in.

In the days that followed, he assisted wounded shipmates in hospital and undertook the solemn duty of arranging burials for those who had succumbed to their injuries. When he reached Nouméa, New Caledonia, Sherlie handed over the payroll records he had rescued from the sinking ship. Because of that simple, instinctive act — tucking a copy of the pay list into his shirt before abandoning ship — the Strong's crew could be paid promptly, sparing survivors and grieving families the long hardship of reconstructing lost records.

Thirty-two men were ultimately lost in the sinking of the Strong. Sherlie carried their memory with him throughout his life, attending reunions decades later and maintaining contact with those who had shared that terrible night.

The USS Strong memorial at the South Pacific WWII Museum. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

Currently, his Purple Heart rests with the Museum's Project Manager Jimmy Carter in Australia, who will be personally bringing the medal to Santo later in the year.

Through Ross Brennan's thoughtful donation, Lieutenant (jg) Keith Norman Sherlie's courage, practicality and deep concern for his fellow sailors will form a lasting part of our memorial. It is a medal that represents not only wounds received, but lives saved — and a spirit of duty that endures.

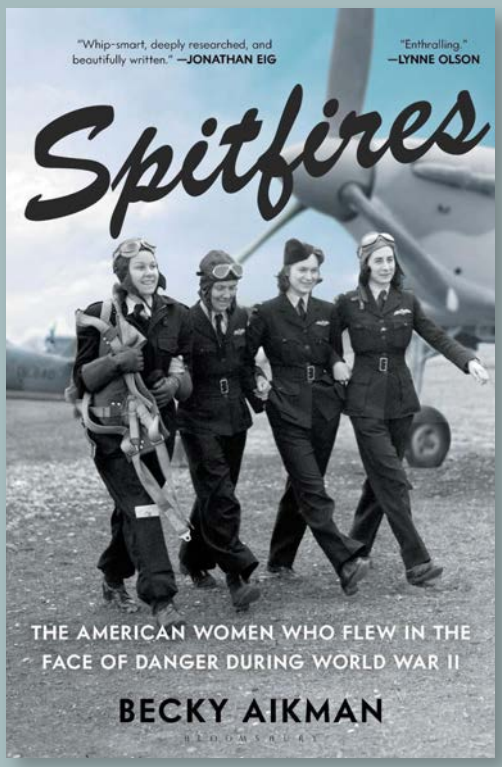
Spitfires

The American women who flew in the face of danger during World War II.

A book review by Tammi Johnson

Many people are still unaware of a pivotal role of women during WWII. While men were flying the planes in both the European and Pacific theatres, they needed someone to deliver those planes from the manufacturer to the airfields where they could be accessed by the pilots. Most men who could do that were being used to fight the war, so who could they count on? That's where some very brave, smart and capable women stepped in to fill the need. This particular book covers the ATA or Air Transport Auxiliary operated out of the UK and eastern Europe. America had the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program which started a bit later than the ATA due to discrimination based on their gender. WASPs also served in the South Pacific ferrying aircraft, but not in any combat roles. England wasn't so picky about using women and about 25 American women volunteered for duty overseas and were mostly gladly accepted; even though they were needed, proving themselves capable was still a challenge. Men were also part of the ATA and during the time of duty between 1941-1945; 1,246 persons served and 168 of them women. In all, there were 309,000 aircraft of 147 types, delivered to various airfields.

These remarkable women were from all levels of society across America. There were socialites, farm girls, mothers, teachers and even a few that had broken into being flight instructors in the U.S. before landing this gig as war time pilots. Some left their lives behind and reinvented themselves to form a brighter future. They flew everything from the small Mosquitos (de Havilland DH.98) to the bigger bombers of all types. Some even died in the process. Others survived serious accidents caused by weather, equipment malfunction of the aircraft, or rarely operator errors in judgement upon landing. While employed by the military of the UK, they received no military benefits such as those awarded to the pilots or air crew. The WASPs in the U.S. fared no better until President Jimmy Carter recognised them in 1977. The women of the ATA did not get their share of recognition until 2008.



Flying and the freedom it afforded them, changed lives. Most wished to pursue flying after the war ended in 1945, only disappointment awaited them back home and in Europe. The jobs flying went back to the men returning from the war and the women were left to pick up the pieces in jobs on the ground. The stories of the women portrayed in this book are well worth the read.

Tammi Johnson
Project USS Strong DD467

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

Final stop on the Tokyo Express

Officers of the Aoba Detachment on Guadalcanal, 1942. Photo – ww2incolor.com

In February 1943, there was a remarkable scene, where in the South Pacific, one side lost but won – and the other side won but lost.

The side that lost was the Japanese navy and army. They had reluctantly conceded that they could not retake Guadalcanal Island.

The steady losses of naval vessels and experienced air crew had become too much – and there were at least 10-thousand soldiers starving to death on the island.

But the Japanese would win – by rescuing those soldiers, using the famous night-time runs by the destroyers of the Tokyo Express. They did so because the measures involved in the withdrawal looked a lot like what they would have done in making a fresh massive attempt to retake the island.

That, at least, on the US side, was the apparent top-level assessment. They believed another big attack was probably coming, But the overall commander, Admiral Bull Halsey, chose to hold his cards – keeping back his remaining carriers, and declining to risk his surface vessels in the confined waters around the island. They would have reacted very differently if they had known the Japanese were in fact retreating.

There is an intriguing side note to the game of bluff. In 1958, a former Japanese intelligence officer claimed he helped encourage the Americans to look the other way.

Japanese marines on Guadalcanal. Photo – ww2incolor.com

Ito Haruki, of the Imperial Japanese Navy, claimed that using the frequency of an American Catalina spotter aircraft, to send a bogus sighting report of Japanese carriers. In fact, a couple of days earlier, a B-17 on patrol had

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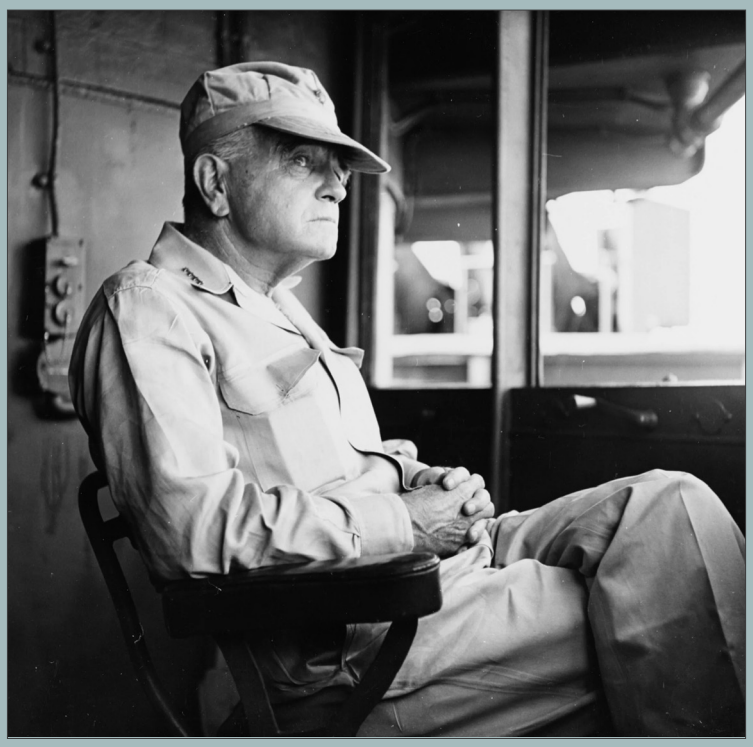
sighted an actual Japanese carrier force sent out as a feint. But it was too distant for the Americans to attack.



Admiral William Halsey, Commander, on the bridge of his flagship, USS New Jersey (BB-62), while en route to carry out raids on the Philippines, December 1944. Photo – Naval History and Heritage Command.

As John Prados notes in his book, Islands of Destiny, American researchers did establish there was a PBY in the vicinity claimed by Ito, but there was no clarity on whether the bogus signal was ever circulated to other US commands.

Ito himself found great consolation in the phony signal, telling the interviewer that the fake message which helped the evacuation, "will be my only consolation." Senior officers had reprimanded Ito for violating Navy security regulations with this gambit.

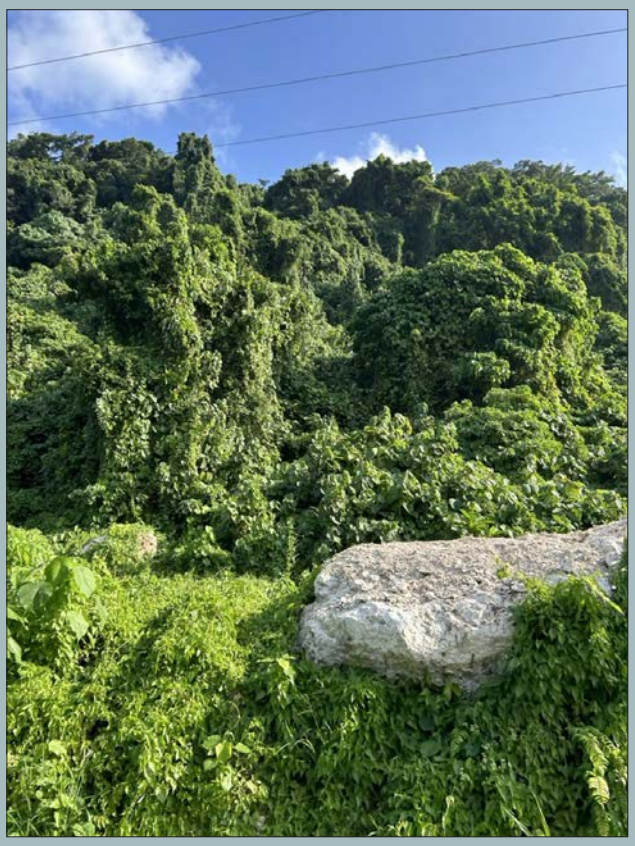
The truth was that the penny did finally drop for the Americans – that the Japanese had evacuated the island under their noses. Or as the Army messaged Halsey, Tokyo Express No Longer Has A Terminus on Guadalcanal.

The Japan Peace Memorial Park on Guadalcanal sits on a ridge line leading toward Mt. Austin, overlooking Honiara and the sea. Photo – tracesofwar.com

Japanese troops load onto a warship in preparation for a "Tokyo Express" run sometime in 1942. Photo – Wikipedia.

The tangled truth

For many people on Espiritu Santo, the vine known locally as Big Lif Rop is simply part of the landscape — a thick green curtain draped over trees, fences, abandoned buildings and even wartime relics. It climbs silently, spreads relentlessly, and once established, is almost impossible to remove.



Big Lif Rop covers this jungle on the side of a mountain not far from Port Olry on the east coast of Santo. Photo – Jimmy Carter.

But did it really arrive with the Americans during World War II?

That was the question put recently to Museum Project Manager Jimmy Carter during an interview on Pacific Beat, broadcast by ABC Radio Australia. The program was exploring the origins of invasive species in the Pacific, and Santo's infamous vine — said by many to have been introduced by U.S. forces as camouflage — featured prominently.

As Jimmy explained on air, the truth is more complex than local legend suggests.

Two Vines, One Story

During World War II, two fast-growing tropical vines were widespread across Santo:

- **Big Lif Rop (Merremia peltata)**
- **Mile-a-Minute (Mikania micrantha)**

Both species are vigorous climbers. Both grow at extraordinary speed in tropical conditions. And both were present on Santo during the war years when more

A US Navy ammunition bunker on Aore Island in 1944 shows Mile-a-Minute vine growing across its roof. Photo – US Archives.

than 500,000 American servicemen passed through what was then the New Hebrides.

Big Lif Rop, with its broad, heart-shaped leaves, is today regarded as one of the most significant drivers

This photo from 1943 clearly show Big Lif growing naturally in the jungle on Santo. Photo – US Archives.

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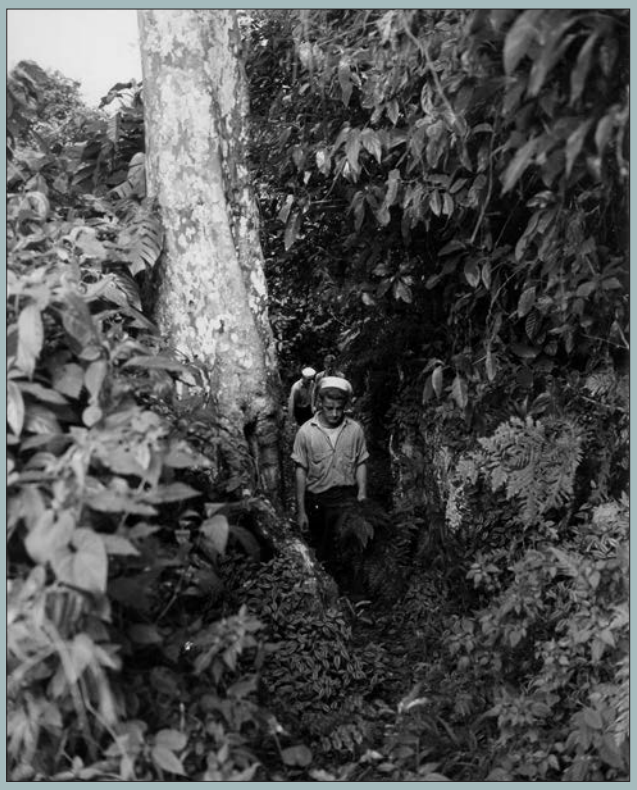

This photo of a jungle trail taken in September 1943, shows Mile-a-Minute enveloping the surrounding jungle. Photo – US Archives.

of deforestation in Vanuatu. It smothers trees, blankets forest stands, and collapses vegetation under its weight. Entire sections of secondary growth can disappear beneath its dense canopy.

Mile-a-Minute, as its name suggests, is equally aggressive. It produces masses of small white flowers and lightweight seeds that disperse easily. Unlike Big Lif, however, Mile-a-Minute is not native to the Pacific. Its origins lie in Central and South America.

And that distinction matters.

The Camouflage Theory

For decades, many Santo residents have believed that one of these vines was deliberately introduced by American forces to camouflage ground installations — fuel dumps, aircraft revetments, supply depots and other strategic sites.

Given the scale of wartime construction on Santo, the idea is not so far-fetched. Camouflage was critical. Concealment from Japanese reconnaissance aircraft was an operational priority, particularly during the tense months of 1942 when invasion seemed possible.

But belief and proof are not the same thing.

At present, there is no documented evidence that US forces introduced either vine to Santo. No shipping manifests, agricultural records, or military directives have been found confirming their deliberate importation. Much of the story rests on anecdote — passed down through generations.

Research conducted at King's College London and confirmed by local agricultural colleges suggests that Big Lif Rop was present in Vanuatu long before the war and is considered native to the region. If that is the case, it cannot logically have been introduced by American forces in the 1940s.

Mile-a-Minute, however, presents a more intriguing possibility.

Aircraft enthusiast Brigg Ranford inspects this WWII engine firewall on Espiritu Santo. Mile-a-Minute vine can be seen growing all over it. Video frame – Karl von Moller.

A Likely Suspect?

Unlike Big Lif, Mile-a-Minute does not belong naturally in the Pacific ecosystem. Its Central and South American origins raise legitimate questions about how and when it arrived.

There are also stories — though again anecdotal — of similar introductions elsewhere. In Assam, India, local accounts claim that British forces used Mile-a-Minute in 1942 to help conceal an airfield.

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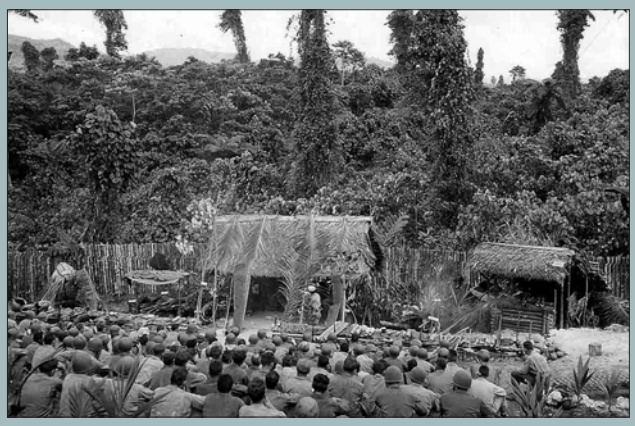

The US Army's Combat Training Centre on Santo gave troops 'fresh off the boat', survival training in the jungles of the Pacific. Photo – US Army Signal Corps.

Whether that story is factual or folklore remains debated, but it demonstrates that military use of fast-growing vines for camouflage was at least conceivable.

Photographs taken on Santo during World War II clearly show both Big Lif Rop and Mile-a-Minute present on the island at the time. That much is beyond dispute.

So if one species were to have been introduced during the war, logic suggests Mile-a-Minute is the more likely candidate.

But logic is not proof.

The Japanese Ambassador to Vanuatu, Okuda Naohisa (right), stands under the remains of an American ammunition bunker on Santo. Both varieties of vines can be seen growing over the top. Photo – Mayumi Green.

History in the Undergrowth

Today, many people see the large leaves of Big Lif Rop dominating the landscape and assume this must be the American import. Its size makes it conspicuous.

Its impact on forests makes it notorious. Over time, the narrative has attached itself to the most visible culprit.

Yet the evidence points elsewhere — or at least leaves the question open.

As Jimmy noted during his Pacific Beat interview, the introduction of flora and fauna is rarely documented with precision. Across the Pacific, many invasive species arrived through complex and poorly recorded pathways.

Determining origins often requires piecing together botanical studies, shipping patterns, wartime activity and ecological timelines.

In Santo's case, we are left with photographs, scientific research, oral histories and informed inference.

And sometimes, that is as close as history allows us to get.

War's Unintended Legacy

The American presence on Santo during World War II reshaped the island in profound ways. Much of that infrastructure vanished after 1945, dismantled, abandoned or reclaimed by vegetation.

But the environmental footprint lingers.

As the museum continues to explore Santo's wartime history, stories like this remind us that history is not only found in documents and relics. Sometimes it grows around us, tangling itself through trees and across landscapes, waiting for closer examination.

The vines that now blanket parts of Santo are more than just an environmental challenge. They are part of a larger story — of global movement, wartime urgency, and the unintended consequences that can echo for generations.

And as with so much of history, the answer lies not in certainty, but in careful research, open inquiry, and a willingness to look beyond the obvious leaf.

Liberators in the Shadows

Once one of Australia's most closely guarded wartime secrets, little known Leyburn Airfield in Queensland, Australia, held onto its highly classified role for many years following the conclusion of World War II. Guest Author Ian Waters OAM, a friend and donor to the museum, looks at what actually went on at Leyburn, why all the secrecy and how the airfield is being remembered today.

With the passage of time the mantle of secrecy has dissipated and Leyburn's history can now be shared and celebrated as it so richly deserves.

Leyburn, located in Australia just a short two and half hours' drive from Brisbane, has a unique history.

The 7 December 1941 attack on the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbour ushered Japan's entry into World War Two and that of the United States. The domino effect of Allied territorial losses to Japanese forces ranging from Hong Kong to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands placed Australia in the invidious position of near isolation from its supply lines and effective assistance from its allies, particularly the United States.

Leyburn Airfield was situated west of Brisbane on the Darling Downs farming district of Queensland. It was one of Australia's most secretive bases during World War II and featured a 7000 feet long runway and a 5,350 feet long runway capable of handling B-24 Liberator bombers. Photo – Ian Waters.

This came home loud and clear with the fall of Rabaul, in Papua New Guinea on 23 January 1942, to an overwhelming Japanese naval force almost identical to that which attacked Pearl Harbour. This opened a period of brutal occupation of this idyllic township which held fast until the Japanese capitulation on 15 August 1945.

The bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942, devastated the small but vital town. Once again, the Japanese attacked with overwhelming strength as was deployed in the Pearl Harbour and Rabaul attacks. Darwin, the Northern Territory in general, and parts of Western Australia's north, were subjected to 62 additional raids between 4 March 1942 and 12 November 1943.

In light of these events, the threat of invasion was very real and Australia, with its vast northern coastline and small population, was indeed vulnerable. The invasion threat struck fear into the hearts of the government of the day and tangible steps were taken to facilitate the capacity to wage war from the west should the position of the coastal regions become untenable.

RAAF Base Leyburn was born in this period of national emergency, and it was one of four fields provided for the operational flexibility of the United States Army Air Force's Heavy Bomber force in the event of a Japanese landing near Brisbane. By April 1943, both the airfield and personnel camp were completed.

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Flight Sergeant Jim Banks (far right) with other crew members from 200 Flight, who flew supplies behind enemy lines in the Pacific, pose in front of their B-24 Liberator, most likely at Leyburn Airfield. Photo – Daily Telegraph/Jim Banks.

By the end of 1942, the Coral Sea and Midway naval engagements and the land fighting successes in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, had lessened the threat of invasion in the South, and air operations were being conducted from airfields in Queensland's north and the Northern Territory. The result being, Leyburn, along with an additional sixteen Queensland airfields, entered a period of inactivity until it was awakened in 1944 when Australia acquired its first allotment of B-24 Liberator Heavy Bombers.

Three B-24 Liberators from 7OTU Tocumwal in southern New South Wales, in formation over the Australian coutryside. Photo – Ian Waters/AWM.

Conversion training to B-24's initially took place at Tocumwal in Southwestern New South Wales; however, consolidation training took place elsewhere, including Leyburn. In early 1945, that was to change and Leyburn entered a period of secrecy that was to last for many years post WWII.

Enter 200 Special Duties Flight. 200 Flight, a Royal Australian Air Force formation, was born out of the desire of the Allied Intelligence Bureau to have its own secure capacity to insert and resupply its trained personnel into enemy held areas by air. This applied principally to the Netherland East Indies (now Indonesia) when Japanese forces had essentially been by-passed by General MacArthur's campaign towards the Philippines and beyond.

Supplying and maintaining contact with such operatives were clearly supplementary aerial tasks, and modified Liberators were the obvious aircraft for the job. Leyburn was chosen partly for its isolation, and 200 Flight was formed on 15 February 1945.

Royal Australian Air Force ground crew maintain a B-24 Liberator at Leyburn Airfield. Photo – Ian Waters.

Enter Z Special Unit. The unit was the creation of, and a military formation within, the Allied Intelligence Bureau. Their purpose being to wreak havoc behind Japanese lines and gather much needed intelligence.

Their lives, and that of the airmen serving them, depended on utmost secrecy. Accordingly, the clandestine nature of 200 Special Flight's purpose and operations dictated the need for their sole occupation of RAAF Leyburn and 23 Squadron was relocated to Long Airfield in the Northern Territory and 99 Squadron to Brymaroo in Southeast Queensland.

Staging camps for the Z Special Unit operatives were located at hidden locations adjacent to Leyburn. The two military formations were to have little contact to lessen the likelihood of security breaches.

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200 Special Flight and tragedy were to become synonymous. Initially equipped with six Liberators, three were soon to be lost on operations.

B-24 Liberator A72-191 went missing off British North Borneo on 25 March 1945, during an operation "Semut 1" insertion with the loss of 200 Flight's Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Graham Pockley DFC and Bar (US equivalents are Major and DFC with Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster).

B-24 Liberator A72-159 crashed near Dili, Timor on 17 May 1945, on a "Sunbaker" reconnaissance mission, and B-24 Liberator A72-177 crashed in British North Borneo on 21 May 1945, on an "Agas 2" sortie.

Flying Officer Herbert James Clark was a member of the crew who lost his life when B-24 Liberator A72-159 crashed near Dili in 1945. Photo – ozatwar.com

Within a few weeks of operations, fifty percent of 200 Flight has been lost to enemy action and the families of some 32 Airmen and nine Z Special Unit Operatives would be grieving their irreparable loss. However, as is required in time of war, the collective courage and resilience of the Flight rose to the occasion.

In addition to this, another five Z Special Unit Operatives were to lose their lives on covert ground operations after having left the peaceful surrounds of Leyburn in 1945.

200 Flight disbanded in April 1946 and the airfield fell quiet. In many respects its war time history remained shrouded in secrecy along with the exploits of those who operated from its runways in 1945, in the few remaining days of World War 2.

With the passage of time the mantle of secrecy has dissipated and its history has now become known and celebrated as it so richly deserves.

On the 70th Anniversary of the Japanese capitulation and the end of WWII, a monument was unveiled and dedicated to those who lost their lives on operations from RAAF Leyburn. In total, four RAAF Formations operated out of RAAF Leyburn and each are celebrated on the monument at the site of the original airfield.

Ian lang (left), an RAAF Leyburn veteran stands next to Jim Banks, a Z-Force veteran at the unveiling of a permanent monument to those who flew and crewed at Leyburn Airfield. Photo – Ian Waters.

Addtionally, a Roll of Honour fixed on a memorial stone in the Leyburn township reads, in part:

'We remember the following RAAF aircrews and the undercover ground operators of "Z" Special Unit who departed Leyburn and gave their lives in Borneo and Timor.'

Their deeds are now history, their history, our history, the history of Queensland and a grateful nation and, in every respect; they form a part of the very fabric of the small and caring rural community of Leyburn.

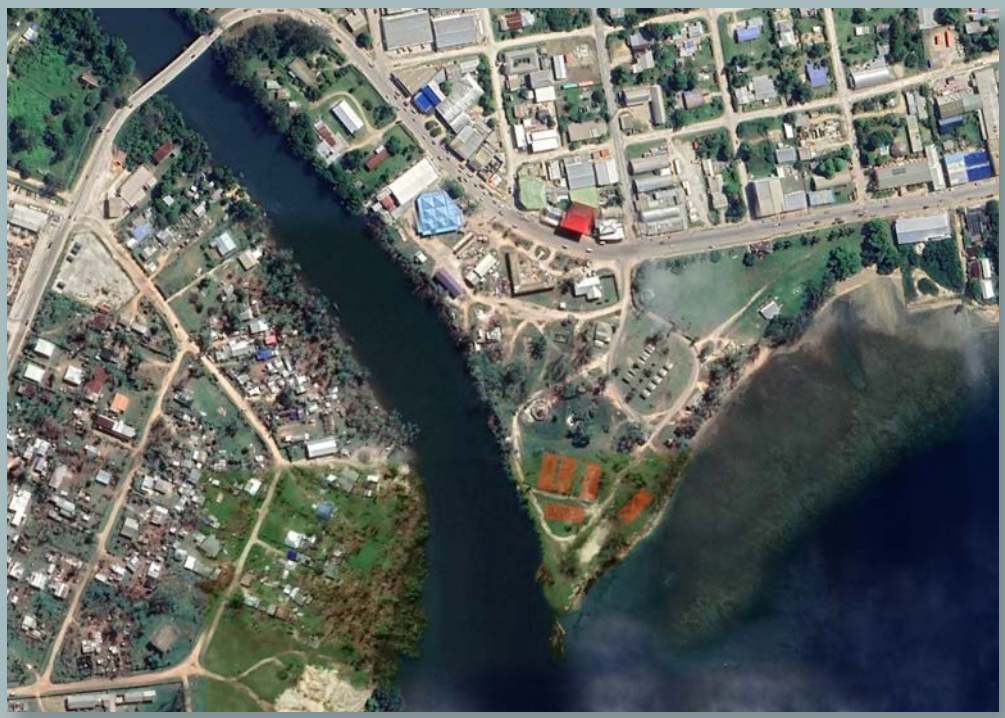
Further information on this interesting period of South Pacific wartime history can be found in a fascinating video on YouTube, put together by the Leyburn and District Historical Society. You'll find it at:

https://youtu.be/Lae9CpHpcCc

Then and now - Unity Park

For those who may not know, the South Pacific World War II Museum is located in Unity Park, Luganville — on the very ground once occupied by the WWII No. 2 PT Boat Squadron Base, beside the Sarakata River.

Unity Park as it was when No.2 PT Boat Squadron occipied the site, which included a jetty into the Segond Channel. Photo – US Archives.



Unity Park in late 2024. Luganville is very different to what it was like 80 years ago. Photo – Google Earth.

One of the most striking changes to this peninsula over the past 80 years has been its shape. In particular, the southern tip has altered dramatically. When comparing images from 1943 with today, it is clear that a significant portion of land has been lost to erosion — visible in the section shaded green on the wartime photograph. That gradual reshaping of the shoreline claimed the old slipway, though remnants of the sheet piling wall can still be seen protruding from the water at low tide.

The colour image also highlights another connection to the past. The five red rectangles mark the former locations of Quonset huts that once housed the PT Boat engine overhaul workshops. Today, the activity is rather different. All that remains of those workshops are five concrete slabs — now repurposed as basketball courts, echoing with the sound of bouncing balls instead of wartime machinery.

Inspiring everyday heroes

The powerful volcano on the Vanuatu island of Ambae is again erupting, reviving memories of the 2017-18 eruption that forced the mass evacuation of islanders. Of course, most people flee volcanoes – but not, naturally, vulcanologists.

Dr Philipson Bari took this close-up image of the latest eruption – Photo Vanuatu Daily Post.

One of these keeping an especially close eye on Mount Lombenben is Ambae-born Dr Philipson Bani. He operates with a New Caledonia research team – and as part of the international Trail by Fire team tracing volcanic gases in South America.

He has visited some fifty volcanoes in the last 10 years The Vanuatu Daily Post recently reported that he has now trekked to the volcano's crater.

Dr Bani told the newspaper that a minor eruption started on February the 13th, and said the volcano is entering a new phase of eruptive activity. He says a lava flow emerged from a new cone within the Voui crater, creating a spectacular glow visible across the island and even from nearby islands of Maewo and Pentecost.

Explosions and lava fountains have followed - sending ash and volcanic gases high into the atmosphere on February the 22nd. Dr Bani's measurements are that around 6-thousand tonnes of sulphuric gases are being emitted each day – but only about a sixth of the 2017-18 emissions. He says the gas is a key indicator of volcanic activity and rising levels can signal that the eruption is intensifying. It is also the gas responsible for acid rain, as it reacts with water in the atmosphere.

The Vanuatu Meteorology and Geo-Hazards Department say it has mobilised its team to closely monitor the volcano and will provide updates as needed.

For now, people are strongly advised to avoid the summit and crater area, and to protect water reservoirs in areas under the plume's path.

Fingers crossed then for the people of Ambae that they can this time ride out the eruptions.

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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South Pacific WWII Museum
Unity Park, Main Street,
Luganville, Espiritu Santo
Vanuatu

info@southpacificwwiimuseum.com
southpacificwwiimuseum.com