

You Did It

The South Pacific WWII Museum is working towards creating a dedicated library and research centre to house the growing collection of photographs, documents, books and personal wartime material coming to us from around the world. It will provide secure storage for these collections and a place for students and researchers to explore more of Santo's extraordinary wartime story.

To help make this happen, we launched

a fundraising campaign with a target of US\$22,000, which would unlock matched funding from the Swire Group Charitable Trust.



A big thank you from everyone at the museum including (from L-R) Museum volunteer Bemoli, Baby Mark, Support Officer Marina, Museum Assistant Lyn and Chairman Bradley Wood. Photo – Mayumi Green.

There were times when US\$22,000 seemed a very long way away.

Then someone would make a donation.

Sometimes it was a few hundred dollars. Sometimes considerably more. Some donors had supported the Museum before;

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others had never donated to us. Some had visited Santo. Others have never been to Vanuatu. Some have a direct connection to those who served here during the Second World War. Others simply believe this history is too important to be lost.

Little by little, the total climbed.

People who have followed the Museum for years, donated before and decided to do so again, or simply wanted to be part of what we are building.

There were donations from Australia, the United States and elsewhere around the world. Some gave a significant amount. Others gave what they could.

And every single one counted.

The Museum has been fortunate to receive grants, sponsorship and practical assistance from governments, businesses and organisations. But this campaign was different.

It showed that a museum can also be built by a crowd of people who simply believe it should exist.

The South Pacific WWII Museum started small. It grew because people believed that the extraordinary role Santo played in the Pacific War deserved to be remembered.



A rendering of the proposed research centre/library that we will be adding on to the museum, thanks to the generous support of many people from around the world. Rendering – Jimmy Carter.

And now, we can finally say the words we have been waiting to say:

"You did it."

The South Pacific WWII Museum has reached the US\$22,000 fundraising target set for the Swire Group's matched funding commitment.

That means the Museum can unlock the matching support that will help us take another important step towards creating the research centre and library.

Swire's commitment gave us a target to aim for and an opportunity for the people who care about the Museum to make a real difference.

And they responded.

And it is why, when we said we needed to raise US\$22,000, people decided to help.

Our target was reached. Swire's matched funding unlocked. And another piece of the Museum's future secured.

So, from all of us at the South Pacific WWII Museum, thank you.

Thank you for believing that this history matters.

Thank you for believing that the stories of those who came to Santo during the war deserve to be remembered.

Most importantly, thank you for helping ensure future generations can still discover those stories.

We asked for your help. You answered. We did it.

Making Waves of War

There are few places in the world where the last years of the Second World War would seem further away than the tranquil waters of Auckland's Hauraki Gulf.

Today, the Whangaparaoa Peninsula is a beautiful corner of New Zealand, dotted with beaches and sheltered bays. At nearby Shakespeare Bay, visitors come to paddleboard, windsurf, walk the coastal tracks — and perhaps catch sight of the resident peacocks.



Whangaparaoa Peninsula as it is today. A truly beautiful and peaceful part of New Zealand. Photo – Facebook.

But in 1944, this peaceful stretch of water was the scene of one of the strangest and most secretive experiments of the entire war.

More than 3,700 explosions were set off in the waters off Whangaparaoa in an extraordinary attempt to harness one of nature's most destructive forces.

The weapon they were trying to create was a tsunami.

The story began with an American naval officer, Commander E. A. Gibson. While working in the Pacific, Gibson had noticed something intriguing. Explosions being used to clear submerged coral reefs could produce surprisingly large waves. It led him to wonder whether, with enough explosives in the right place, those waves could be turned into a weapon.

The idea was passed to New Zealand's Chief of General

Staff, General Sir Edward Puttick, who took it to the New Zealand War Cabinet.

New Zealand was already deeply involved in the Allied war effort across the Pacific, and its scientists, engineers and military personnel would play a surprisingly important role in what became known as Project Seal.

Before the project moved to Auckland, American and New Zealand personnel conducted preliminary experiments off Nouméa, New Caledonia, in February 1944. Among those involved was Professor Thomas Leech of Auckland University, who would soon become the scientific leader of the New Zealand program.



Portrait of Professor Thomas Leech. Photo – Jan Freimanis - environment.nsw.gov.au

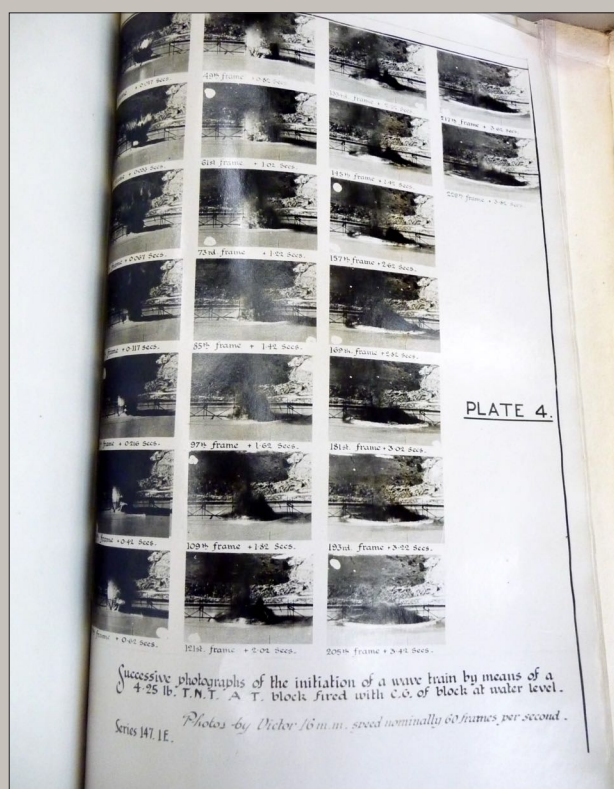
The results were sufficiently encouraging to attract the attention of one of the most senior American commanders in the Pacific, Admiral William "Bull" Halsey.

Halsey's assessment was remarkably enthusiastic. He believed the experiments demonstrated that artificially generated waves might have "definite and far-reaching possibilities" in amphibious warfare. He asked New Zealand to continue the work and see whether a practical weapon could be developed. (continued...)

On 5 May 1944, the New Zealand War Cabinet approved the establishment of a highly classified research unit under Professor Leech.

Around 150 people were involved and much of the work was carried out by New Zealand engineers and scientists, while explosives and ordnance were supplied by the United States Navy. Special equipment had to be designed and built, including remote wave-recording instruments and radio-controlled firing systems. British and American scientists also visited to observe the experiments.

And then the explosions began.



Test photography of some of the detonations creating a 'wave train' by means of 4.25 pounds of TNT. Photo – New Zealand Geographic.

From June 1944 until the project was shut down in January 1945, the waters off Whangaparaoa became an unlikely laboratory. Charges ranged from only a few grams to almost 300 kilograms. TNT was used extensively, along with explosives such as nitro-starch and gelignite.

The scientists were attempting to answer a deceptively simple question:

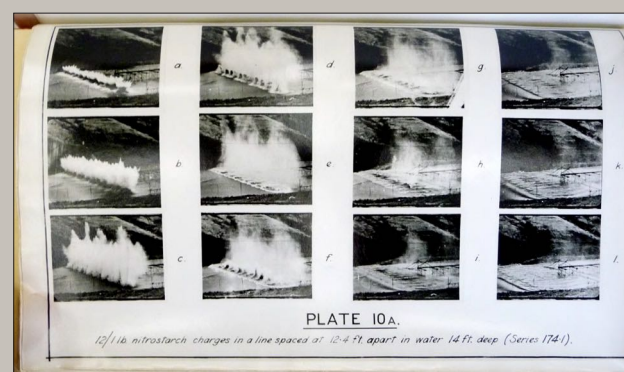
Could an explosion in the sea create a wave powerful enough to overwhelm a defended coastline?

At first, they thought the answer might depend on depth. Earlier British research had suggested that underwater explosions should be detonated deep beneath the surface, where the expanding gas bubble created by the blast might produce the greatest wave.

Project Seal proved them wrong.

The experiments demonstrated that the most effective waves were generated when the charges were detonated much closer to the surface.

But there was another problem. One enormous explosion wasn't enough.



More testing this time using nitrostarch charges, in the search for that elusive tsunami. Photo – New Zealand Geographic.

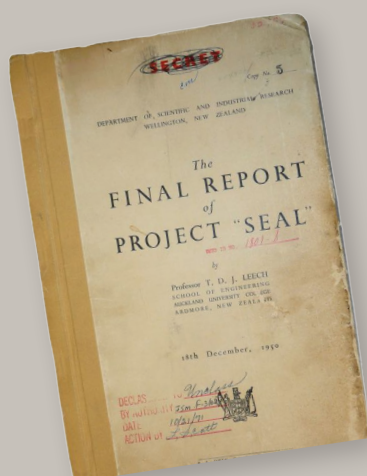
The scientists discovered that the explosive charges needed to be detonated together in a carefully calculated pattern. Their theoretical work suggested that an array containing up to two million kilograms of explosives, divided into roughly ten charges and positioned about eight kilometres offshore, could potentially produce a wave between 10 and 12 metres high.

It sounds almost like something from a science-fiction movie. Yet these were serious wartime scientists and engineers, working from thousands of real explosions and painstaking measurements. They also discovered just how unforgiving the ocean could be. The depth of each charge had to be remarkably precise. Even a relatively small deviation from the optimum depth could rob the resulting wave of much of its energy.

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The tsunami bomb was never built on anything approaching its proposed operational scale. Nor was it ever used against an enemy.

By early 1945, the strategic situation in the Pacific was changing rapidly. The Allies were advancing, and the urgency of finding another weapon for an amphibious assault was diminishing. At the same time, the United States was secretly developing something that would ultimately make almost every other experimental weapon seem insignificant: the atomic bomb.



The Final Report of Project Seal. Photo – New Zealand Geographic.

Project Seal was therefore shut down in January 1945, before its full potential could be tested. Yet the work did not simply disappear.

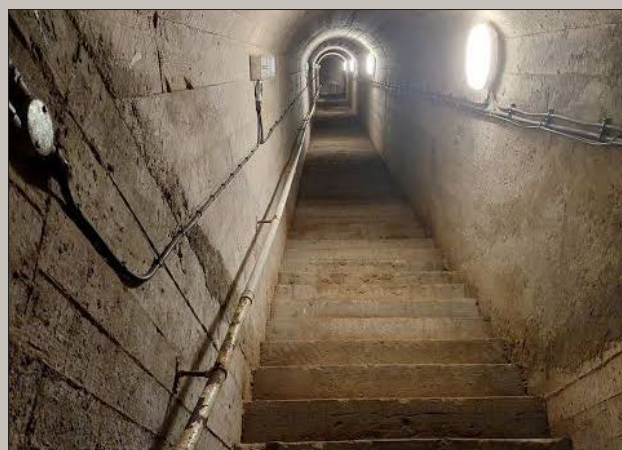
Professor Leech was later invited to assist the United States Navy in analysing data from the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll, while New Zealand engineering students continued working into the 1950s on the enormous body of data gathered during the project.

The final report, The Generation of Wave Systems, became a remarkable scientific record of an experiment that very few New Zealanders knew had ever taken place.

And perhaps that is what makes Project Seal so fascinating today.

New Zealand is not usually the country that comes to mind when we think about the development of revolutionary weapons during the Second World War.

Yet, in a quiet corner of the Hauraki Gulf, New Zealand scientists, engineers and servicemen were working alongside their American counterparts on a weapon that was once considered potentially comparable in importance to the atomic bomb.



Parts of Project Seal's infrastructure are still surviving today. These are the stairs down inside the Degaussing Station on the Whangaparaoa Peninsula. Photo – Albom Adventures.

There is also something strangely fitting about the fact that one of the most destructive ideas of the war was tested in such a peaceful place.

Today, you can stand on the shores of Whangaparaoa and look across the same waters where those thousands of explosions once thundered.

There is little to suggest that anything extraordinary ever happened there.

But beneath the calm surface of the Hauraki Gulf lies one of the more extraordinary — and largely forgotten — chapters of New Zealand's wartime history.

And when we look at the enormous Allied effort that surrounded places such as Base Button, it is a useful reminder that the Pacific war was not simply fought by the men carrying rifles on distant islands.

It was also fought in laboratories, workshops and hidden corners of the ocean — by scientists and engineers trying to imagine what might come next.

Even if, in this case, what came next was a 12-metre wall of water.

Keeping Button Talking

When thousands of American servicemen began arriving on Espiritu Santo in 1942, they brought with them something almost as important as ammunition, aircraft and fuel: the ability to communicate.

Behind the enormous wartime operation that became Base Button was a less visible army of radio operators, telephone linemen, switchboard operators, technicians and radar specialists. They were members of the U.S.

Second Channel. It wasn't.

In a war fought across thousands of miles of ocean, communications were fundamental. Orders, weather information, aircraft movements, shipping information, intelligence, supply requests and casualty reports all had to move rapidly and reliably. A base such as Button could not operate simply as a collection of separate units. It had to function as a connected system.

And connecting an island in the South Pacific was anything but simple.

The Signal Corps history describes the communications problem created by the American advance across the Pacific as an "island hopping" problem. Once an island was secured, the first requirement was a rapid communications link with another island base. Radio was the obvious answer, because it could be established comparatively quickly. But once an island became a permanent operating base, radio alone



Installation Team 204 of the 71st ACS at Espiritu Santo. This job was to install critical early-warning radar systems, radio arrays, and fighter-control networks to guide Allied aircraft. Photo – Signal Corps Archives Photostream - Flickr.

Army Signal Corps, and their job was to make sure that messages could travel across an island, between islands and, ultimately, across the Pacific.

The first Signal Corps personnel arrived on Santo in March 1942 with Task Force 6814. The unit was the Provisional Signal Service Company, later redesignated the 809th Signal Service Company. Its initial responsibilities included operating the base administrative radio station and message centre.

That might sound relatively mundane compared with the bombers and warships gathering around the



Speed was everything in combat. This telephone centre was set up two hours after landing at Kamiri Airstrip, Noemfoor Island, Dutch New Guinea. Photo – Signal Corps Archives Photostream - Flickr.

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The communications centre/receiving station at Base Button on Espiritu Santo, 29 January 1945. Note the sign for the base's radio station 'Radio Santo' on the right side of the photo. Photo – US Archives.

wasn't enough. Extensive telephone and telegraph networks were required as well.

That distinction became particularly important on Santo.

By August 1943, Base Button was supporting an extraordinary concentration of military activity. The Army station list for 15 August includes the 809th Signal Service Company, detachments of the 842nd Signal Service Company, a Signal Phone Company, the 260th Signal Construction Company, and the 674th Signal Aircraft Warning Company, among the many other units based on the island.

The Signal Corps was therefore doing much more than operating a radio room.

Its men were stringing telephone lines, installing switchboards, maintaining radio stations and providing communications for the rapidly expanding network of airfields and military installations. They also operated aircraft-warning systems and, increasingly, radar.

The wider South Pacific network was becoming remarkably sophisticated. By late 1942 and early 1943, communications circuits connected Nouméa with Brisbane and Sydney, while other circuits reached Auckland, Suva, Guadalcanal, Efate and Espiritu Santo.

The Santo station was linked into both the Nouméa–Guadalcanal circuit and the Nouméa–Efate–Espiritu Santo network.

Some of the equipment used to create this network was hardly what anyone would have chosen for a major military communications system. The Nouméa–Espiritu Santo–Efate triangle, for example, initially relied on a commercial Hallicrafters HT-4 radio, modified for military use. Other stations used Navy equipment, rebuilt Army transmitters and whatever could be obtained locally. As proper equipment gradually arrived, these improvised arrangements were

replaced by more permanent Signal Corps installations and radioteletype systems.

And getting that equipment to Santo could be an adventure in itself.

One shipment of approximately 14,000 pounds (6,350kg) of communications equipment intended for Espiritu Santo was mistakenly delivered to Plaines des Gaiacs in New Caledonia. Another vessel carrying 800 miles (1,290 km) of wire sat waiting to unload for more than two months. A further shipment containing radio equipment spent weeks sitting aboard a ship before



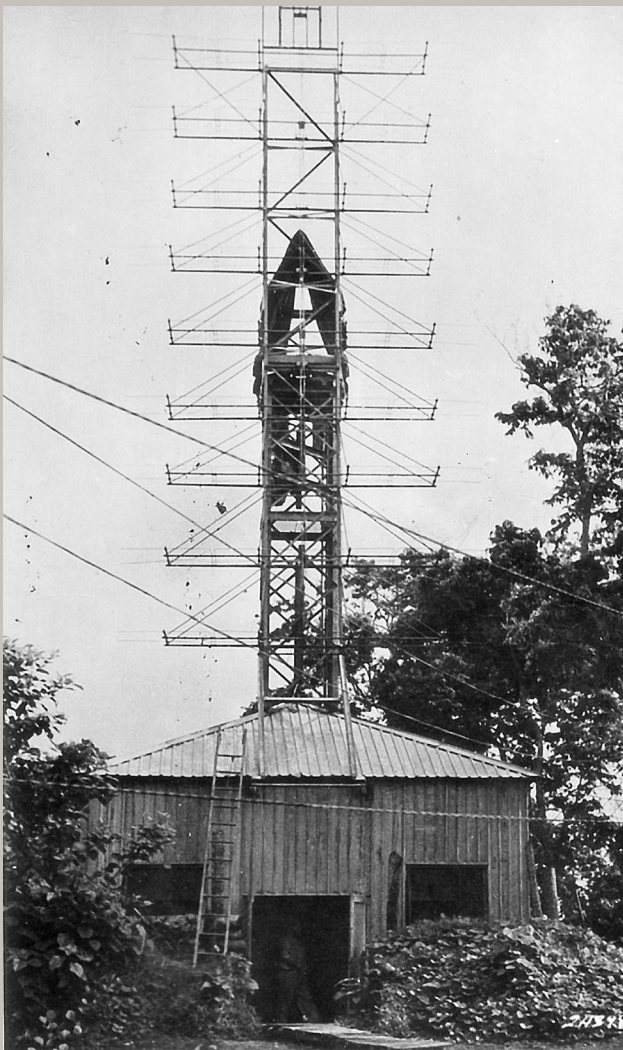
The telephone switchboard for Marine Corps Squadron VMD-154 in 1943. It handled communications traffic within the squadron's camp and out to the wider base area. Photo – US Archives.

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being sent to Santo — and then was eventually ordered back to sea with the equipment still aboard.

Even when equipment arrived, the tropical environment fought back. Heat, humidity, salt spray and jungle conditions attacked communications equipment relentlessly. Telephone-wire insulation could be damaged by ants; salt water corroded metal components; and the leather components of EE-8 field telephones could grow mould and deteriorate. The Signal Corps eventually developed special methods of waterproofing, moisture-proofing and fungus-proofing equipment destined for tropical service.

On Santo, meanwhile, communications were becoming ever more important as the island developed into one of the great Allied bases of the Pacific.

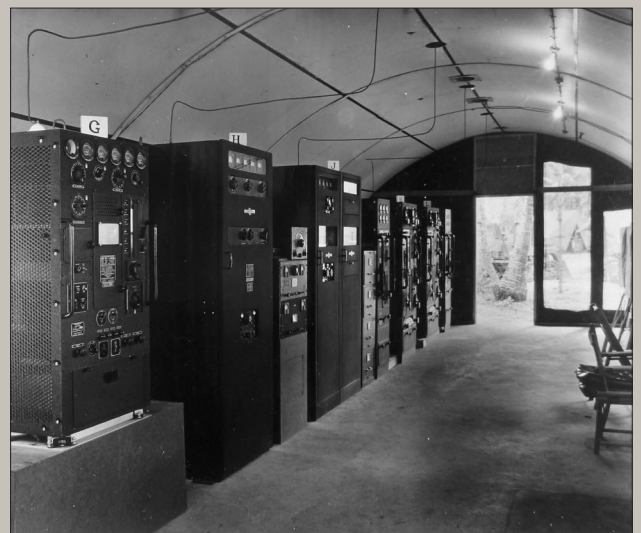


Exterior of 3rd Radar Reporting 674th Signal A.W. Special Co. on Espiritu Santo, 1 July 1943. Photo – US Archives.

By early 1943, the South Pacific Command's Army Airways Communications System had stations operating at Espiritu Santo, Guadalcanal, Efate, Tontouta, Plaines des Gaiacs and Nandi, supporting everything from routine aircraft movements to emergency supply flights and the evacuation of wounded personnel.

So when we look at photographs of Base Button today — the aircraft, ships, enormous warehouses, workshops and thousands of men — it is worth remembering the unseen network behind it all.

Every telephone ringing, every radio transmission received, every aircraft guided safely towards an airfield and every message passed between commanders depended upon men whose work was rarely noticed unless something went wrong.



While not on Santo, this shot taken of the interior of the transmitter buildings on Majuro Atoll, Marshall Islands, shows the level of technical sophistication employed by the Allies throughout the Pacific. Photo – US Archives.

The Signal Corps helped make Base Button more than a collection of military installations. It helped turn it into a connected, functioning base — a vital link in the vast communications web that stretched from Santo across the South Pacific and ultimately back to the United States.

And in a war where an order was only useful if it could reach the man who needed to act on it, keeping the Pacific talking was very much part of keeping the Pacific fighting.

Yankee Doodle Jr. Comes Home

Few wartime aircraft on Espiritu Santo have become as famous as B-17E Flying Fortress 41-9227, better known as Yankee Doodle Jr.

For more than 80 years, the remains of the aircraft sat in the jungle not far from Million Dollar Point. Hidden beneath tropical vegetation but visited by an ever-growing stream of curious travellers, the wreck became one of Santo's best-known aviation relics.

Now, after all those years, what survives of Yankee Doodle Jr. has finally come home to the South Pacific WWII Museum.



B-17E, Yankee Doodle Jr. prior to its crash on Espiritu Santo in December 1942. It is not known where this photo was taken, however, given the bombs waiting to be loaded in the background, it could well have been taken on Bomber #1 airfield on Santo. Photo – Various.

The story of the aircraft itself is one of the strangest in Santo's wartime history.

Built by Boeing in Seattle as Constructor's Number 2699, the B-17E was delivered to the U.S. Army Air Force as 41-9227 and eventually found its way to the South Pacific, where it was assigned to the 13th Air Force, 11th Bombardment Group, 431st Bombardment Squadron and based on Santo.

On 31 December 1942, with New Year's Eve celebrations approaching and the beer supply apparently running low, Yankee Doodle Jr. was sent to Fiji to collect more.

It sounds almost like the beginning of a tall wartime tale: a four-engined Flying Fortress being dispatched on a beer run. But there was nothing amusing about how the story ended.

Piloted by Captain Jack N. Levy, with 1st Lieutenant Robert B. Andrews aboard, the bomber took off from Bomber #1 Airfield at Pallikulo Bay. It never made

it beyond Santo. The engines had not reached proper operating temperature and the aircraft lost power on one side shortly after take-off. Yankee Doodle Jr. crashed, killing Levy and leaving Andrews so badly injured that he later died.

The official report recorded the mission with remarkable bluntness: the aircraft had "...crashed Espiritu Santo on liquor ride..."

Both men were declared dead on the day of the crash and are buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Punchbowl in Honolulu.

So the wreck became part of Santo's landscape.

For the next eight decades, the remains of the B-17 sat where the aircraft had come to rest, gradually being reclaimed by the jungle. Trees and vines grew through and around it. Rain, humidity, tropical heat, cyclones and salt-laden air all worked relentlessly on the aluminium and steel.

But nature was not the only thing taking its toll.

Over the years, pieces of the wreck disappeared. Some were taken by souvenir hunters wanting

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The wreck of Yankee Doodle Jr. sat in the jungle not far from Santo's famous Million Dollar Point for 80 years. This shot was taken prior to recent land clearing that has made recovery of the wreck a far easier task for the museum. Photo – karl von Moller.

a tangible piece of history to take home. Other material may have been removed for entirely different reasons. We simply do not know how much of the aircraft was dismantled for usable parts after the crash, how much may have been removed and sold as scrap, or how much was taken away and put to other uses over the decades.

There was also 'other' damage. Young men sometimes used bushknives to pierce or cut the aircraft's skin, whether out of boredom, curiosity or perhaps simply to prove something to their friends.

Bit by bit, year by year, the wreck became less of an aircraft.

By the time the museum was able to recover the surviving material, there was no complete B-17 waiting in the jungle. What remains is a collection of significant pieces of Yankee Doodle Jr. — some immediately identifiable, others requiring further investigation.

Among the most recognisable survivors are the large radial engines, sections of wing and the vertical stabiliser, which remains attached to what is left of the rear fuselage. There are other components too, and one of the museum's first jobs will be to establish exactly what we have. In some ways, that makes the recovery even more important.

These are not simply aircraft parts. They are the surviving physical evidence of Yankee Doodle Jr. and its

remarkable story. Each piece has spent more than 80 years exposed to the elements and the changing landscape of Santo.

The museum had always wanted to do something to preserve what remained of the B-17, but the practical reality was complicated. The wreck was on private land, and any attempt to recover it had to be undertaken with the agreement of the people connected to that land.

The museum understood that the landowner had his own interests and responsibilities, and for years there was no simple answer to what should



The same location as the previous photo 10 years later. Much of the jungle has been cleared and more of the aircraft missing. Photo – Bradley Wood.

happen to the wreck. Then the situation changed dramatically.

The land was being sold off and development was beginning to look increasingly likely. Suddenly the future of Yankee Doodle Jr. was no longer simply a question of gradual deterioration in the jungle. There was a very real possibility that what remained could disappear altogether — potentially ending up as scrap metal.

The museum could not sit back and watch that happen.

Museum Chairman Bradley Wood began a determined campaign to convince the landowner that the surviving remains of the B-17 had a future far more important than their value as scrap.

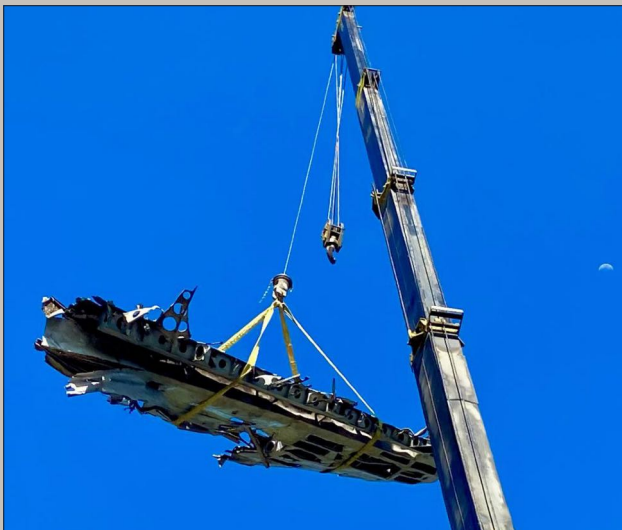
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For weeks, the discussions went backwards and forwards. There were proposals, counterproposals and plenty of moments when it seemed the answer might never be yes.

But Bradley kept talking. Eventually, one day, the landowner simply said yes. The surviving wreckage would be donated to the South Pacific WWII Museum.

That was the breakthrough everyone had been hoping for. Now came the considerably more difficult task of getting what remained out of the jungle.

The recovery required teams of men working through the vegetation, chainsaws to cut away trees that had grown through and around the surviving sections, trucks to move the material and a crane to lift some of the heavier components.



A section of Yankee Doodle Jr.'s horizontal stabiliser is craned out of the recovery site to be placed on a waiting truck. Photo – Bradley Wood.

It was not the recovery of an aircraft in the conventional sense. It was the careful removal of what had survived an extraordinary 80 years in the Santo jungle.

We are extremely grateful to Santo Hardware for assisting the museum with the crane and trucks required for the recovery. We are also particularly grateful to General Manager Leighton Shearer, who has once again stepped forward to help the museum when we have needed it. Support from local businesses such as Santo Hardware is enormously important to the museum, particularly when we take on projects that are well beyond the scope of our normal operations.

And so, after more than eight decades, the surviving remains of Yankee Doodle Jr. are no longer sitting alone in the jungle. They are now part of the collection of the South Pacific WWII Museum.



The remains of one of the huge Wright Cyclone R-1820-97 engines that were fitted to the B-17. Once it's been clean up it will go on display at the museum in Luganville. Photo – Bradley Wood.

There is still plenty of work ahead. Our first task is to take a detailed inventory of everything recovered. Every surviving component needs to be identified, photographed and assessed. Some pieces are immediately recognisable; others may require research before we can establish exactly where they belonged on the aircraft. Only then can we decide how best to preserve and display them.

For now, though, there is something particularly satisfying about knowing that these pieces of Yankee Doodle Jr. are safe.

What survives has endured a wartime crash that claimed the lives of two young airmen, more than 80 years of tropical weather, cyclones, salt air and jungle growth, and decades of human interference. It has survived long enough for another generation to recognise that these fragments are more than old pieces of aluminium and steel.

The South Pacific WWII Museum has the responsibility of making sure that what remains of Yankee Doodle Jr. is preserved, understood and used to tell its remarkable story for generations to come.

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

Zero Orders, Full Throttle

In early September 1945, the war in the Pacific had just ended.

Far from the frontlines, cut off Japanese bases remained, until recently still the object of active missions by Allied forces.



Petty Officer Sekizen Shibayama, Zero Pilot. Photo – Auckland Museum/Originally sourced from 'La última Águila Marina de Rabaul,' Nonsei SGM: Historias de la Segunda Guerra.

Two months earlier, Japanese Navy fighter ace Petty Officer Sekizen Shibayama had been ordered to Buin, Bougainville, to test-fly a painstakingly rebuilt A6M3 Zero.

The aircraft had been damaged in 1943 and hidden in the jungle for 18 months. Unbeknownst to Shibayama, local commanders planned to load the restored fighter with a 250kg bomb and send him on a one-way kamikaze mission against Allied shipping.

Fortunately, compassionate Japanese ground crews guessed his fate and deliberately dragged out the repairs to spare his life. Japan surrendered before the plane was combat-ready, leaving Shibayama alive and the aircraft grounded.

That's where in August, Wing Commander Bill Kofoed, a highly decorated Royal New Zealand Air Force bomber pilot, discovered the aircraft.

Now painted in the white and green "Green Cross" surrender livery, the Zero was slated to be left behind.

Furthermore, defence authorities had issued strict orders forbidding Allied personnel from flying captured enemy aircraft.

But Wing Commander Kofoed, driven by technical curiosity, ignored the directive.

At the airstrip, Kofoed and Shibayama formed a brief bond over their shared profession.



Squadron Leader WR Kofoed, RNZAF 462 Squadron. Photo – Auckland Museum/Australian War Memorial. (continued...)

Shibayama gave his former enemy basic instructions on the aircraft's controls and piloted a ground test while Kofoed sat on the wing.

With a final affectionate pat on the fuselage from Shibayama, Kofoed climbed into the cockpit.



The 'captured' Mitsubishi A6M3 Zero, flown by Wing Commander Kofoed, lands at Piva airfield in Bougainville. Photo – Auckland Museum/Royal New Zealand Air Force/Vintage Wings of Canada.

Completely unauthorized, Kofoed took off and flew the Zero for 20 minutes to the RNZAF base at Piva, keeping the undercarriage locked down for the duration.

Upon landing, the Commander of the New Zealand Air Task Force formally reprimanded Kofoed for his

"bloody stupid" disobedience—before taking him into his quarters, pouring him a whiskey, and warmly congratulating him.

The Zero was shipped back to New Zealand in October 1945 and eventually found a permanent home at the Auckland War Memorial Museum, where it sits to this day.

Decades later, in 1997, Shibayama travelled to Auckland to see his "unforgettable" plane one last time.



RNZAF personnel surround the Zero on its arrival at Piva, Kofoed is visible standing on the far wing at the rear of the cockpit with his arm resting on the canopy. Photo – Auckland Museum/Museum of the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

Material for this article draws on the work of the Auckland War Memorial Museum, which in turn draws on a variety of sources. You can read more here at [The Zero: Two men and a plane](#) | Auckland Museum



The beautifully restored captured Zero now on display on Level 2, Auckland War Memorial Museum. Photo – Auckland Museum.

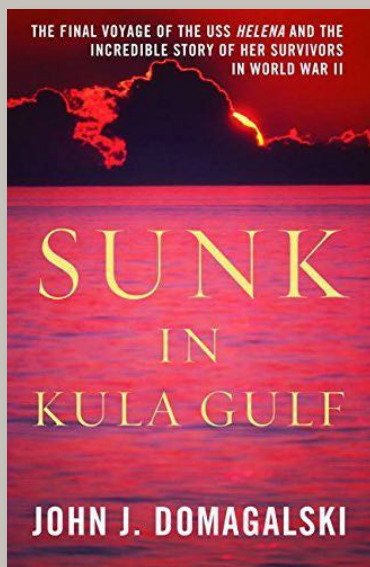
Sunk in Kula Gulf

The Final Voyage of the USS Helena and the Incredible Story of her Survivors in World War II

By John J. Domagalski

A book review by Tammi Johnson

In telling the story of Helena (CL-50), a Brooklyn-class light cruiser built in the 1930s, Mr. Domagalski covers the fate of USS Strong (DD-467) the focus of my own research in the Kula Gulf of the Central Solomon Islands, consisting of New Georgia, Arundel Island to its southwest and the volcanic island of Kolombangara directly west of New Georgia across the gulf. Helena went down in what was noted as the Battle of the Kula Gulf on 6/8 July 1943, just 25 hours after the sinking of my ship, Strong. I was fortunate that in contacting him years ago he shared his Strong research with me. Now, about the fate of Helena...



Helena was with TG 36.1 involved in Operation Toenails just north of the Kula Gulf when a battle with Japanese destroyers commenced. She was struck by three of the deadly type 93 torpedoes. One hundred and sixty-eight men died upon sinking while two American destroyers, USS Radford (DD-446) and USS Nicholas (DD-449), both

Fletcher-class destroyers, involved in the events the previous evening inside the Kula Gulf, plucked survivors from the depths. Men covered in fuel oil in the dark of night are very hard to see, even in the lifeboats. Radford had even dropped a whaleboat off the side to assist the men in the water who were soon joined by the captain, Charles P. Cecil. Having missed being picked up and with the captain leading them, they steered lifeboats toward Vella Lavella Island. They did not know at the time if the island was occupied by the Japanese and stayed close to the beach and the boats upon landing. A daring rescue the next day by the USS Gwin (DD-433, a Gleaves-class destroyer) and USS Woodford (DD-460, a Benson-class destroyer) finally got the men off safely before they could find out. And yes, there were Japanese on the island.

The ship that took responsibility for sinking Strong the night before, the IJN Niizuki was also lost within minutes of Helena. Being just a short distance away and just north of the mouth of the Kula Gulf, it's possible one of her torpedoes also took out Helena and in return Helena got her shot in at Niizuki.

Espiritu Santo is mentioned frequently in the book, covering Helena's visits there from the beginning of their service in the South Pacific in 1941 until it's a fully developed base including medical facilities, clubs for both enlisted men and officers, and practically an entire island just for rest and relaxation on Aore just across Second Channel. The book tells another of the great WWII stories of bravery and survival in the heat of battle. Another highly recommended read by John J. Domagalski.

Tammi Johnson
September 2026

Cool Cats And Beer Bottles

When Michael S. Tarnawski arrived at Espiritu Santo, the sight that greeted him was unlike anything he had seen before. Looking out over the harbour, he remembered seeing ships everywhere — “the whole fleet was out there.” For a young Navy radio operator serving with Patrol Squadron 12 (VP-12), Santo was to become an important base for the long-range Catalina patrols that stretched north and west across the Pacific.



The Second Channel on 29 August 1943, with just a handful of the ships at anchorage in the deep water port. It must have been quite a sight for a young Navy radio operator.
Photo – US Archives.

Tarnawski had already experienced the shock of war. He had been at Kaneohe Bay when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, watching helplessly as Japanese aircraft strafed the PBYS lined up on the apron. Later came long patrols from Hawaii and Midway, often lasting ten to fourteen hours. But the South Pacific was different.

At Espiritu Santo, the squadron flew patrols towards the Gilbert Islands. The Catalinas operated from the water, and life ashore was basic. Tarnawski and the other enlisted members of his seven-man crew lived together in a tent. He vividly remembered arriving in the wet season: the ground was so saturated with yellow mud that, as he put it, “I need a rowboat to get to it.”

However, there were compensations. Tarnawski and a friend would sometimes make their way down to the harbour and persuade passing boats to take them aboard for a meal. Their own food was less exciting — “Spam. Three times a day.”

The Catalinas were not fast aircraft, but speed was not their strength. They could stay airborne for hours, carrying their crews deep into the Pacific on reconnaissance and patrol missions. Tarnawski served as one of two radio operators, but on a PBY every crew member had additional responsibilities. The aircraft carried .50-calibre machine guns, and everyone had to be prepared for trouble.

And trouble did come. Japanese Mitsubishi “Betty” bombers sometimes attacked the patrol aircraft, although Tarnawski recalled that their own .50-calibres gave them an advantage. Eventually VP-12 was divided, with part of the squadron remaining at Santo while Tarnawski’s crew went to Guadalcanal.

It was there that one of the strangest bombing missions of the war unfolded.

The PBYS were carrying conventional 500-pound bombs beneath their wings. But around their base were boxes of ammunition and piles of mortar



A ‘bombed up’ PBY on the ramp in the Aleutians, 1942-1943. The cart carries 500lb bombs and 100lb depth charges, the aircraft is armed with 500lb bombs as well. Photo – Tumblr.com (continued...)



The Seaplane ramp and base on the Segond Channel in December 1942. Six PBV Catalinas can be seen on the ramp. Photo – US Archives.

shells simply lying about. Tarnawski's crew gathered up some of the shells and took them with them on a mission. Then, during a pass over a Japanese position, they dropped something rather less conventional.

Mortar shells. Beer bottles. Rocks. Bricks. Anything they could find.



An American beer bottle found near the wreck of a PBV Catalina in the Segond Channel that dates back to the early to mid 1940s. Could it have been one that was on board the nearby Catalina wreck prior to its demise? Photo – Jimmy Carter.

The beer bottles were particularly effective — not because they caused much damage, but because they whistled as they fell. Tarnawski thought the sound kept the Japanese awake. He compared the noise with the screaming bombs he remembered from watching German Stukas: "A bomb comes through the air, don't whistle."

There was something almost absurd about the story, but beneath the humour was the reality of life in the Pacific. These Catalina crews were flying long, dangerous missions in slow, heavily loaded flying boats, improvising with whatever they could find.

For Tarnawski, the war in the South Pacific was a mixture of mud, Spam, twelve-hour patrols, Japanese bombers — and, occasionally, a load of beer bottles raining down on the enemy.



A radio operator inside a PBV Catalina, Michael Tarnawski's 'office' while on board Catalina aircraft Photo – pbycat.org

Michael S. Tarnawski's story was based on an oral history recording in the National Museum of the Pacific War, Fredericksburg, Texas. Thanks to Archivist, Rachel Barnett for her assistance. PacificWarMuseum.org

Then and now - Bomber #1 Pallikulo

Pallikulo Bay, on the northern coast of Espiritu Santo, became one of the major Allied airfields on the island during the Second World War. Construction of Bomber Field #1 began in August 1942, with US Navy Seabees transforming the coastal plain into a substantial bomber base in just a few months.



Bomber #1 as it was on 17 November 1942. It was a big and had to be to handle the large aircraft operating out of there. If you look hard you can see a line what appears to be B-25 Mitchell bombers lined up on the taxiway closest to the bay. Photo – US Archives.

The original coral runway was about 5,000 feet long before being progressively extended to between 6,200 and 7,000 feet and surfaced with pierced steel planking (PSP), also known as Marston matting.

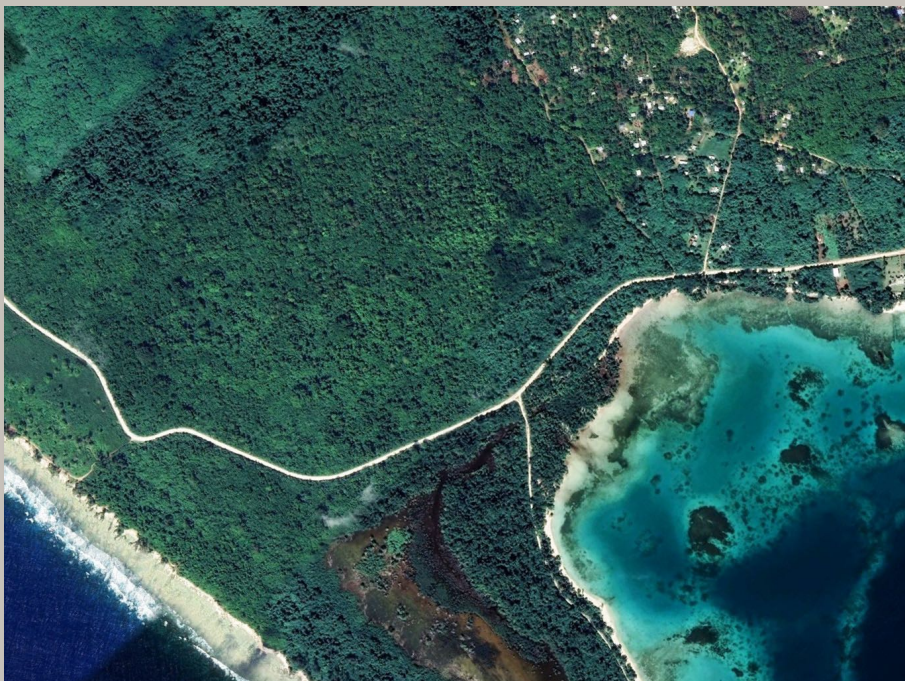
The field was home to USAAF B-17 Flying Fortresses, including aircraft of the 23rd, 72nd and 394th Bombardment Squadrons. Among them was the B-17E Yankee Doodle Jr, that famously crashed on its beer run and has recently been recovered by the museum.

B-24 Liberators later operated from the field, while RNZAF No. 3 Squadron flew Hudsons from Pallikulo in late 1942 and later Venturas in 1944–45.

Pallikulo was an important part of the growing network of Allied airfields that made Santo a major base for operations across the South Pacific.

Driving the scenic coast road today, there is absolutely no sign of Bomber #1 or any of the airfield infrastructure that was located at the south east end of the airfield.

Although one highlight is Harbour Wrecks Beach Bar and Restaurant overlooking the bay - you can't miss it.



Today, there is nothing left of the airfield. This photo taken on 21 August 2024, shows the coast road running around from Million Dollar Point to the left of frame and cutting across the top of Pallukulo Bay towards the Santo Golf Club further north - to the right of frame. Photo – Google Earth.

Inspiring everyday heroes

Markets are fantastic places in Vanuatu, where you will meet the women affectionately known as Mamas. They will be wearing colourful Aelan dresses, big smiles, and homegrown produce they have often travelled long distances from remote settlements to sell. The mamas we want to talk about were at the Vanuatu Made Trade Show in Port Vila.



Makira mothers Belinda Simon (left) and Shamina Song are excited to return home and continue their bottled-fish business after selling out at the trade show. Photo – Vanuatu Daily Post.

Mothers from the Malalima Mamas Association in Malakoto village on Makira Island produced a bottled fish that proved a sellout winner. It used reef or pelagic fish cut into small pieces, marinated in oil, salt, and sweet chilli sauce, and preserved in small bottles.

The bottled fish can last up to 18 months before expiring.

The Vanuatu Daily Post says with the sea being their main source of income, the mothers travelled from Makira to Port Vila, braving long distances, high swells, and rough weather to introduce their product to a wider market.

They brought only fifteen bottles to the trade show, but the product quickly attracted customers and sold out. Within two days, the group had secured six buyers and received information that they could receive monthly orders.

They exchanged contact details and email addresses with potential buyers as they explored opportunities to expand the business.

Shamina Song, one of the mothers, told the newspaper that labour costs would be a challenge, particularly for harvesting and preparing the fish, but it was something the group needed to manage because fishing remained their main source of income.

The association also displayed and sold ginger drinks and traditional handicrafts, including mats and baskets, at the trade show.

**You can read more at the Vanuatu Daily Post.*

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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