SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
VANUATU

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A Friend Worth Saving

Some of the most remarkable stories of the Second World War are preserved not in official histories or military records, but in the personal belongings of the men who were there. And sometimes, those belongings find their way to a museum thousands of kilometres from home, bringing with them a story that deserves to be told.



Warren Covill's service medals. From left to right, Soldier's Medal also known as the Medal of Valor, Bronze Star and Campaign Medal.

The South Pacific WWII Museum has recently received an extraordinary collection of personal memorabilia relating to the sinking of the S.S. President Coolidge, generously donated by Jay Covill of Indiana, USA. The collection belonged to Jay's late father, Captain Warren K. Covill, a man whose remarkable courage during the Coolidge disaster helped save lives and whose desperate attempt to rescue a fellow officer would become one of the most extraordinary acts of the tragedy.

But this is also a story about friendship, loyalty and a debt of gratitude that endured long after the war had ended.

(continued...)

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Two friends aboard the Coolidge

Captain Warren K. Covill and Captain Elwood J. Euart were close friends, having served together in the United States Army. Both were aboard the S.S. President Coolidge when the huge troop transport struck two American mines while entering Segond Channel on 26 October 1942.



Captain Warren K. Covill. Photo – AI restored image.



Captain Elwood J Euart. Photo – Euart Family.

The ship was carrying thousands of American servicemen when the explosions tore through its hull. Despite efforts to save her, the Coolidge eventually ran aground on a reef off the southeast coast of Espiritu Santo before rolling onto her side and sinking.

The evacuation was methodical and calm, but still quite dangerous. As the ship listed further, men trapped below decks faced an increasingly desperate struggle to escape.

Among those working to get them out was Captain Covill.

In an affidavit sworn on 3 November 1942, just eight days after the sinking, Warren provided a remarkable first-hand account of the rescue attempts. His original statement, now part of the museum's new collection, offers an extraordinary insight into what happened during those final moments aboard the ship.

Covill described how he, Captain Euart, Lieutenant MacDonald and other officers helped men escape from C Deck by sending them up a rope towards the starboard side of the ship. As the Coolidge tilted further, the men faced an increasingly difficult climb, with some slipping and falling into the water.

Eventually, the enlisted personnel and officers managed to get out. But Euart remained behind, holding the rope to help others escape the slowly sinking ship.

When Covill reached the top, he looked back and realised his friend was still inside. He and another officer, Mr Moshimer, tried desperately to pull Euart to safety, but their strength was failing. A Navy man came to help, and they abandoned the rope in favour of a rope ladder, which they threw down towards the trapped officer.

Then the ship went under, pulling them down with it.



The S.S. President Coolidge run aground off the coast of Espiritu Santo. Soldiers and sailors abandon ship to esacpe the slowly listing converted passenger liner. Photo – US Archives.

(continued...)

Covill's affidavit ends with a simple but deeply moving observation:

"It is my firm belief that Captain Euart was caught inside the foyer and so gave up his life so that others could live."

Apart from Fireman Robert Reid who was killed instantly by the first mine, Euart was the only man to lose his life during the rescue just prior to the sinking. Covill, meanwhile, somehow survived his own extraordinary ordeal, reportedly being carried back to the surface by an air pocket as the ship disappeared beneath him.



This amazing photo of the last moments of the Coolidge sinking, clearly shows two men at the sea door of the ship, desperately trying to get the last men out of the ship. We believe one of them is Warren Covill. Photo – US Archives.

A hero's sacrifice

The story of Captain Euart and his sacrifice eventually reached newspapers back in the United States. One contemporary headline declared: "Capt. Euart of Pawtucket Revealed as Hero Who Died to Save Men on Coolidge."



CAPT. EUART OF PAWTUCKET REVEALED AS HERO WHO DIED TO SAVE MEN ON COOLIDGE

Capt. W. K. Covill Vainly Tried to Rescue Trapped Friend.

Capt. Elwood J. Euart, 28-year-old Pawtucket mser, geve up his lift 20 save the lives of his men on Oct. 26 when the hoge troop transport, Pres-ident Coolidge, struck a mine in the Solomons aera, wasbeached on a reef, and finally sank.

His lifelong friend, Capt. Warren K. Covill of 30 Prospect street, East Providence, nearly lost his own life trying to save Euart.

Exhnusted hy his efforts to see that every one of his men got safely up a roee to the dech, Euart was trapped in the hold. Capt. Covill stayed by the hatchway, vaisly trying to reseh Euart with another rope. He refused to lump ahead the hest ressice boot as the lioar began sliding off the reef. He wee sucked down deep below the surface, but was miraculouoly caught in an air bubble, threwin to the sur-face and saved.

The War Department today au-thorized disclosure of the tragic epis-odc. Capt. Euart, who was the son of Elwood F. A. Euart, Pawtucket schoolteacher, and Mrs. Euart of 444 Power Road, was one of four men lost in the sinking.

4000 Others Saved

Approximately 4000 others were saved, including o number of Rhode Island officers and men who clung herolo down cargo nets or jumped into the water, which was revered an inch thinis whh oil, and get safely to a neachy island.

In letters home, officers have not mentioned any detail of the loss of the Coolidge or evnt the fect that they were aboard, but they did ask that replacement clothing be for-warded. Capt. Thomas Peckham, for atoompbs, wcote his fmally et 81 South Angell street, this city, thst he was sending home a prized wrist watch ehich had gotied an "uisavoidable seth." Other letteer Indicated that heir personal property was a loss than they knew, but were scrupu-lously avoiding any word that might identify their unit.

Capt. Euart's father said today that "you can't say enough good about Capt. Covill."

He said no other details on the loss would be made public for the the War Department beyond the tel-egram Nov. 7 saying that he had beer drowned somewhere in the Pacific area.

Capt. Covill, in a recent letter to

Continued on Page 6, Col. 1.

Euart

CAPT. ELWOOD J. EUART of Pawtucket sacrificed his life in order to save his men when the transport President Coolidge struck a mine in the Solomons area. His life-long friend, Capt. Warren K. Covill of East Providence, nearly died trying to save Euart.

The Providence Journal newspaper of Providence, Rhode Island featured a number of articles about best friends Warren and Elwood. Clipping – Jay Covill.

The accompanying article described how Euart had stayed behind to help others escape, while his lifelong friend Warren Covill nearly lost his own life trying to save him.

Covill was subsequently recognised for his extraordinary bravery. Among the medals Jay has now entrusted to the museum is his Soldier's Medal also known as the Medal of Valor, awarded for his heroic actions during the Coolidge disaster, together with his Bronze Star and campaign medal from his wartime service.

Another newspaper clipping headed "Almost Died Trying to Save", features a photograph of Covill and describes him as Euart's best friend. It recounts how he went down with the ship while attempting to rescue his friend, only to miraculously survive.

A family's gratitude

Perhaps the most moving items in the collection are two pages of correspondence dated 26 December 1942, written by Elwood Euart's father to Warren's parents.

Written just two months after the tragedy, the letter expresses the family's profound gratitude (continued...)

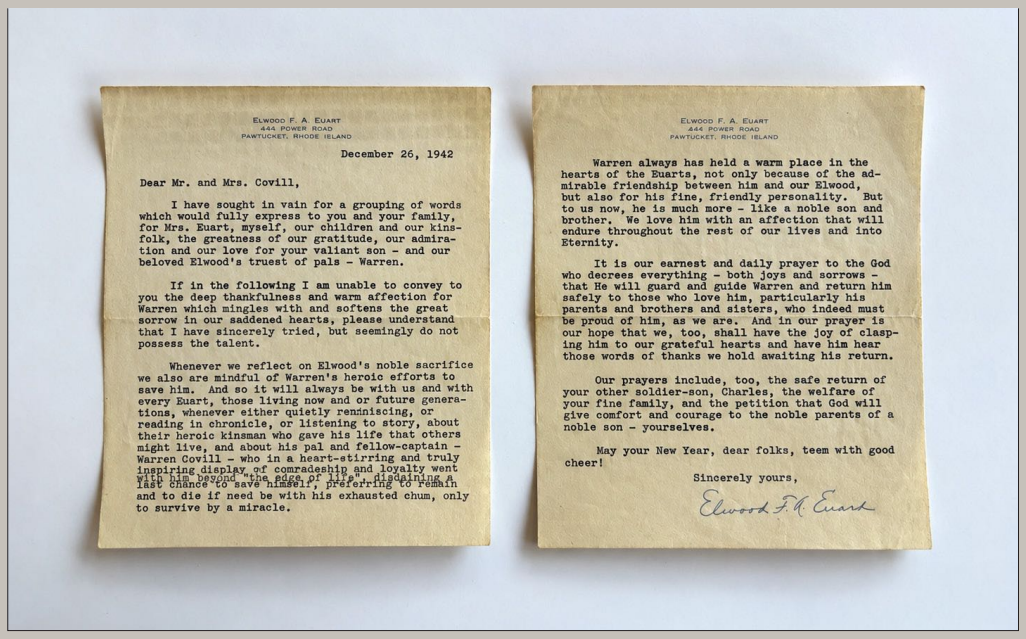
for Warren's efforts to save their son.

Euart's father struggled to find the words to adequately express his family's feelings, writing of their admiration and love for Warren, whom he described as his son's "truest of pals".

He went on to say that whenever the family reflected on Elwood's sacrifice, they would also remember Warren's heroic efforts to save him.

One passage is particularly poignant:

"Warren Covill – who in a heart-stirring and truly inspiring display of comradeship and loyal-ty went with him beyond the edge of life, disdaining his last chance to save himself, preferring to remain and to die if need be with his exhausted chum, only to survive by a miracle."



ELWOOD F. A. EUART
444 POWER ROAD
PAWTUCKET, RHODE ISLAND

December 26, 1942

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Covill,

I have sought in vain for a grouping of words which would fully express to you and your family, for Mrs. Euart, myself, our children and our kinsfolk, the greatness of our gratitude, our admiration and our love for your valiant son - and our beloved Elwood's truest of pals - Warren.

If in the following I am unable to convey to you the deep thankfulness and warm affection for Warren which mingles with and softens the great sorrow in our saddened hearts, please understand that I have sincerely tried, but seemingly do not possess the talent.

Whenever we reflect on Elwood's noble sacrifice we also are mindful of Warren's heroic efforts to save him. And so it will always be with us and with every Euart, those living now and or future generations, whenever either quietly reminiscing, or reading in chronicle, or listening to story, about their heroic kinsman who gave his life that others might live, and about his pal and fellow-captain - Warren Covill - who in a heart-stirring and truly inspiring display of comradeship and loyalty went with him beyond "the edge of life", disdaining a last chance to save himself, preferring to remain and to die if need be with his exhausted chum, only to survive by a miracle.

ELWOOD F. A. EUART
444 POWER ROAD
PAWTUCKET, RHODE ISLAND

Warren always has held a warm place in the hearts of the Euarts, not only because of the admirable friendship between him and our Elwood, but also for his fine, friendly personality. But to us now, he is much more - like a noble son and brother. We love him with an affection that will endure throughout the rest of our lives and into Eternity.

It is our earnest and daily prayer to the God who decrees everything - both joys and sorrows - that He will guard and guide Warren and return him safely to those who love him, particularly his parents and brothers and sisters, who indeed must be proud of him, as we are. And in our prayer is our hope that we, too, shall have the joy of clasping him to our grateful hearts and have him hear those words of thanks we hold awaiting his return.

Our prayers include, too, the safe return of your other soldier-son, Charles, the welfare of your fine family, and the petition that God will give comfort and courage to the noble parents of a noble son - yourselves.

May your New Year, dear folks, teem with good cheer!

Sincerely yours,

Elwood F. A. Euart

The incredibly moving letter from Elwood J Euart's father to Warren K Covill's parents, following the sinking of the S.S. President Coolidge in October 1942. The letter will join the museum's collection of Coolidge items permanently on display in Luganville, Espiritu Santo. Letter – Jay Covill.

The letter concludes with the family's prayers for Warren's safe return and their hope that he would eventually be reunited with those who loved him.

It is a remarkable piece, offering a glimpse into the lasting bond between the two families and the gratitude felt by the parents of a man who never came home.

A remarkable addition to our collection

For the South Pacific WWII Museum, Jay's generosity represents something particularly special.

The museum already holds what is believed to be the largest collection of S.S. President Coolidge material in the world. This latest donation adds an important new dimension to that collection, taking us beyond the history of the ship itself and providing a deeply personal account of the men who were aboard her.

Along with the affidavit, newspaper clippings and family correspondence, Jay has entrusted us with his father's medals, books, two copies of National Geographic magazine featuring the Coolidge story and an interview with Warren, as well as other personal memorabilia relating to his father's wartime service.

These are not simply historical artefacts. They are the surviving pieces of a family's story, carefully preserved for more than eight decades.

Jay, now 75, told us that he had been looking for a meaningful way to do something significant with his father's belongings. We are enormously grateful that he chose the South Pacific WWII Museum as their new home.

Our heartfelt thanks to Jay Covill for placing such an important part of his family's history in our care. It is a privilege to preserve this collection and share his father's story with future generations.

Leyburn Meets Luganville

The South Pacific WWII Museum has welcomed the Leyburn & District Historical Society in Queensland as its fourth affiliate organisation, establishing a new partnership built around a shared connection to Australia's and the Pacific's wartime history.

Although separated by thousands of kilometres of ocean, the two organisations have a surprisingly close historical connection through the men, aircraft and operations of the Second World War.



Leyburn Airfield as it was in 1943 on Queensland's Darling Downs. Photo – Leyburn & District Historical Society.

At the heart of that connection is RAAF Leyburn, located in Queensland, and the B-24 Liberator operations conducted from its wartime airfield. These aircraft and their crews formed part of the wider Allied air campaign across the South Pacific, connecting Australian airfields with the major operational bases scattered throughout the Pacific, including Espiritu Santo.

Leyburn's most secretive chapter began in 1945 with the arrival of 200 Special Duties Flight, an RAAF unit supporting the Allied Intelligence Bureau. Operating modified B-24 Liberators, its role was to insert and resupply Z Special Unit operatives conducting clandestine missions behind Japanese lines, principally in the Netherlands East Indies. The work was exceptionally dangerous, and several aircraft and their crews were lost during these operations, alongside Z Special Unit personnel.

The partnership recognises the importance of preserving these connections and ensuring that the stories of the people, aircraft and operations that linked these places are not lost.

Under the agreement, both organisations will support each other's historical work through the exchange of research, photographs, documents and information, where appropriate. They will also look for opportunities to collaborate on exhibitions, publications, presentations and other historical projects.



Members of the highly secretive Z Special Unit at Leyburn. Photo – Leyburn & District Historical Society.

Importantly, this is a partnership based on friendship, cooperation and a shared commitment to preserving history, rather than financial or organisational obligations.

For the South Pacific WWII Museum, the relationship provides another opportunity to broaden its historical network and strengthen the links between the communities and wartime locations that contributed to the Allied effort in the Pacific.

The Coral Sea may separate Leyburn and Espiritu Santo geographically, but their wartime histories are connected. This new partnership is another step towards bringing those stories together and sharing them with future generations.

Seabees, Spanners and Santo

When Alfred Gutowski boarded a ship in California in December 1943, he had little idea where the Navy was sending him. Like thousands of other young Americans, he was heading into the vast Pacific theatre of war. His destination would be Espiritu Santo, where he would spend almost two years helping support the enormous Allied military machine operating across the South Pacific.



Alfred Gutowski in his navy uniform. Note the Seabees patch on his arm. Photo – Cassandra Ianni.

Alfred's journey into the Seabees had been somewhat unexpected. Before the war, he worked as a tool and die designer at Ford Motor Company's Willow Run plant in Michigan, an important contributor to America's wartime aircraft production. His occupation qualified him for military deferments, but Alfred was increasingly uncomfortable remaining at home while other young men from his community went off to fight. Rather than wait to be drafted, he decided to enlist.

Initially hoping to join the regular Navy, he was told its recruitment quota was full. However, an officer recognised the value of his engineering and manufacturing experience and offered him a place in the Navy's Construction Battalions – the Seabees. Alfred accepted and entered active service on 4 October 1943, as a first-class fireman.

After boot camp at Camp Perry, Virginia, and a short leave at home, Alfred headed west to California. One memory of that departure stayed with him throughout his life. As he boarded the train at Michigan Central Station, he saw his father cry for the first and only time.

On 12 December 1943, Alfred joined almost 500 other servicemen aboard USS Naos (AK-105) at Port Hueneme, California. Their destination was classified, and the ship zigzagged across the Pacific to reduce the risk of detection by Japanese forces. On 3 January 1944, they arrived at Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides.

At just 21 years old, Alfred found himself among men who were largely experienced engineers, tradesmen and construction workers. He was assigned to Construction Battalion Detachment (CBD) 1029, Automotive Division, a unit responsible for storing and issuing the spare parts needed to keep military vehicles and construction equipment operating across the Pacific.

It was an essential but often overlooked part of the Allied war effort. Aircraft, trucks, bulldozers and other machinery could only keep moving if the right parts were available when needed. Santo's position as a major Allied staging and supply base made the work particularly important.



Engineer equipment stored in a massive yard on Santo for inspection before going through repairs. Alfred and men like him were responsible for the parts to keep these vehicles running. Photo – US Archives.

(continued...)



CBD 1029's camp, featuring the ubiquitous Quonset huts, a common sight throughout the base. Photo – Cassandra Ianni.

During his time on the island, Alfred and his fellow Seabees helped establish a small community of their own. Their surroundings included warehouses, a general store, a church and Quonset huts – the familiar curved-roof buildings that became a feature of American wartime bases throughout the Pacific. For the young Michigan tradesman, this was an extraordinary introduction to life thousands of kilometres from home.

Alfred remained in the New Hebrides until November 1945, when he finally became eligible for discharge under the Navy's points system. His youth and unmarried status had meant that he was repeatedly passed over while older servicemen returned home.

His journey took him through New Caledonia and eventually to San Francisco. During the long voyage, while others passed the time drinking, smoking and playing cards, Alfred volunteered to work in the galley, peeling potatoes and helping prepare meals. It also had the advantage of giving him first access to the food!



Alfred and men of the Construction Battalion Detachment (CBD) 1029 in one of the Detachment's Chevrolet Army trucks. Photo – Cassandra Ianni.

He returned to the United States and, after further Navy assignments in Chicago and San Diego, was formally discharged on 11 April 1946. His total service amounted to two years, six months and 15 days.

Alfred never returned to his former job at Ford, eventually establishing his own business.

On 9 August 1947, he married Sophie Bartus, beginning a marriage that would last almost 60 years. Together they raised three children and welcomed six granddaughters to the family.

Alfred passed away on 19 June 2006. His time as a Seabee on Espiritu Santo was just one chapter in a much longer life, but it was a significant one. As one of the thousands of servicemen who helped build and sustain the Allied presence on the island, Alfred played his part in a remarkable period of Santo's history.

He arrived as a young man far from home and eventually left with memories of an island that had become an important part of his wartime story.

The Cold War

Or how a Marine squadron turned a Corsair into an airborne ice cream factory

By September 1944, the men of US Marine fighter squadron VMF-122 were getting a little bored with the war. Stationed on the sweltering Pacific island of Peleliu, in the Palau group, they were flying their Vought F4U Corsairs on bombing and strafing missions, but opportunities for aerial combat were becoming increasingly rare. The Japanese forces were isolated, their supply lines severed, and they were making little effort to challenge American aircraft overhead.



Aircrew from USMC VMF-122 on Peleliu in 1945. Photo – asisbiz.com

For the squadron's commander, Major J. Hunter Reinburg, there was another problem. It was hot, humid, there was no refrigeration, and fresh food was in short supply. What his men really needed was something cold, refreshing and decidedly unmilitary.

They needed ice cream.

Rather than accept that such a luxury was out of reach, Reinburg decided to see whether he could manufacture it himself. And, naturally, he had the perfect piece of equipment for the job: a fighter aircraft capable of flying to altitudes where temperatures plunged well below freezing.

His maintenance crew set to work modifying an old belly-mounted external fuel tank, normally used to extend the Corsair's flying range. They cut off its ends, installed an access panel and suspended a waterproof ammunition can inside. The mess sergeant prepared a mixture of canned milk and cocoa powder, which was poured into the can and secured inside the improvised contraption.

The plan was simple. Fly high enough, stay up long enough, and return to base with five gallons of frozen chocolate ice cream.

Reinburg's first flight was recorded as an oxygen system test. He climbed his Corsair to 33,000 feet and circled above Japanese-held territory for approximately 35 minutes. At that altitude, the temperature was more than cold enough to freeze the mixture. Japanese anti-aircraft guns below took an interest in the aircraft, but their shells couldn't reach him. Reinburg reportedly watched the explosions in the distance while his rather unusual cargo cooled.

Unfortunately, the first experiment wasn't quite the success he'd hoped for. The mixture was certainly cold, but it hadn't frozen properly. The ammunition can had been positioned too close to the aircraft's engine, whose heat was interfering with the process. The result was something closer to a very cold chocolate milkshake.

(continued...)



VMF-122 ice cream maker, Major Joseph H Reinberg with 7 Kills at Guadalcanal 4th July 1943. Photo – asisbiz.com

Nevertheless, the Marines weren't complaining. They drank the lot.

Undeterred, Reinburg ordered a second attempt. This time, the ammunition cans were mounted beneath removable maintenance panels on the Corsair's wings, safely away from the engine. The next flight, disguised as a supercharger test, produced considerably better results.

The mixture froze solid enough to become ice cream, and the squadron suddenly had ten gallons of the stuff, enough to provide a generous serving for around 100 men.

There was just one problem. The consistency was rather flaky, more like frozen milk than the smooth, creamy dessert Reinburg had envisaged.

Clearly, further engineering was required.

For the third experiment, the ground crew added small propellers to the ammunition cans. As the aircraft raced through the air, the propellers spun, driving a small internal mechanism that churned the mixture throughout the flight. This time they got it right. The result was genuine, smooth, creamy chocolate ice cream.

Operation Freeze had been born.

The flights soon became something of a regular operation, with different pilots and aircraft taking turns at producing the squadron's favourite dessert. Officially, they were conducting equipment tests and high-altitude training. Unofficially, they were running an airborne ice cream factory.

It was perhaps inevitable that the secret wouldn't last forever.



Lt. Leroy E. Anheuser in F4U-1A Corsair "Ace of Hearts" of VMF-122 "Flying Leathernecks" near Peleliu. Photo – Reddit

(continued...)

Colonel Caleb Bailey, the group operations officer, eventually became suspicious of the number of supposedly essential test flights being conducted by Reinburg's squadron. He wasn't particularly interested in the technical explanations and certainly wasn't fooled by the paperwork.



A Navy pilot in 1945 enjoys a commercially made version of a treat Marines had been making for themselves. Photo – US Archives.

He contacted one of the squadron's officers and delivered a rather direct message:

"Listen, goddammit, you guys aren't fooling me. I've got spies. You tell Reinburg I'm coming over there tomorrow to get my ration."

It seems the Colonel wasn't particularly interested in stopping the operation. He simply wanted to make sure he wasn't missing out.

Reinburg's ingenuity had achieved something rather more important than producing a few gallons of chocolate ice cream. In the middle of a demanding war, on a hot and isolated Pacific island, he'd found a way to give more than 100 men a little taste of home.

And he wasn't alone. American bomber crews in Europe had also experimented with making ice cream during high-altitude flights, using the freezing temperatures and aircraft vibration to produce their own versions of the treat.

But few could claim to have turned a frontline fighter into quite such an effective dessert machine.

For the Marines of VMF-122, the Corsair had already proved itself a formidable fighting aircraft. Now it had another string to its bow.

Somewhere between 30,000 and 33,000 feet, the war's most unlikely ice cream parlour was open for business.



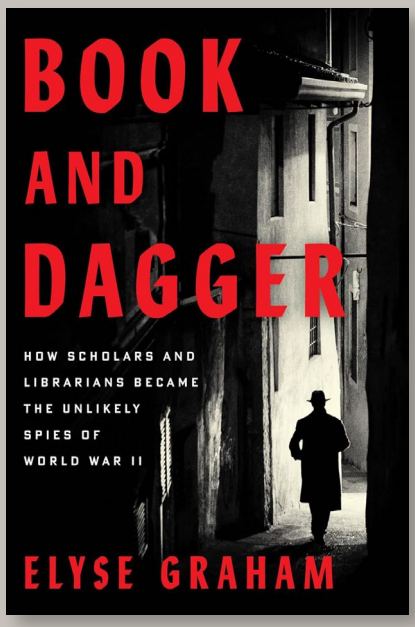
Book and Dagger

How Scholars and Librarians Became the Unlikely Spies of World War II
By Elyse Graham

A book review by Tammi Johnson

We all know about the men and women who went to war; those who served in the air, on the ground and at sea. Those who waited in hospitals across the globe or on ships to treat the wounded and dying. Those who were the officers, the planners of the war that got us through many battles, victorious.

However, there is an entire segment of this history that most don't think about. A well-oiled machine does not work without its parts, and some of these parts may come from places no one considers. Places like universities, libraries, classrooms, museums, code breakers and mathematicians and so much more.



Where did these officers and planners of war get their information used to plan attacks? How did they know the routes and times of trains travelling to supply enemy troops so they could bomb them to oblivion? How did they find the intelligence needed to even plan?

They recruited people from all the professions listed above to pour over old letters, newspapers, books, declassified files and more to glean any information deemed important enough to use against the enemy in both the European and Pacific Theaters of war.

Without using archivists, historians and others to seek out this information and put their lives in danger doing so, this war would not have ended well for the good guys and gals:

"Structurally, R & A (Research and Analysis) might have been a stuffy Washington operation, but when the time came for those at the top to make decisions, they valued the insights of the outsiders and oddballs they'd brought into the fold rather than valuing their own ideas. And that made all the difference... (it was) later argued that no matter what cool toys and gadgets we invent for espionage, nothing will ever replace the importance of the human analyst."

At times these men and women had to steal, lie, and put themselves at great risk. These were civilians, not soldiers; not sailors or airmen and women, many had no previous military experience. But they became the cogs in the machine. People just like you and me.

The author is a very learned person, a professor at Stony Brook University with degrees from Princeton, Yale and MIT. She does an excellent job with her research for this book, a very engaging read.

Tammi Johnson
October 2026

THIS MONTH IN MILITARY HISTORY

Santa Cruz Showdown

By October 1942, the battle for Guadalcanal had become a desperate contest of endurance. American Marines were clinging to Henderson Field, the strategically vital airstrip on Guadalcanal, while Japanese forces were preparing another major offensive to drive them into the sea. Whoever controlled the skies and surrounding waters would have a decisive advantage.



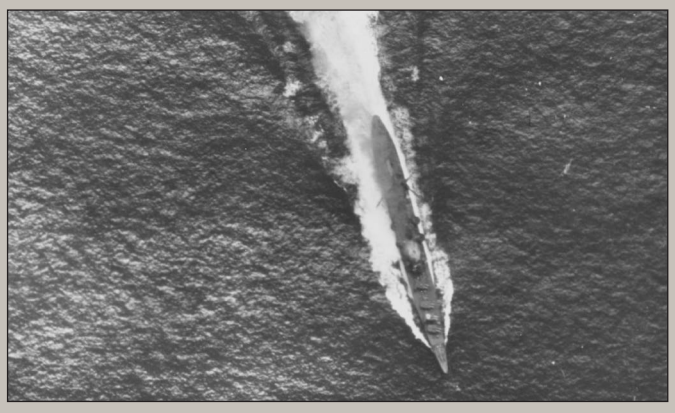
Ships of task force 17 manoeuvre to avoid Japanese air attack, 26 October 1942. Taken by a USS HORNET (CV-8) plane.. Photo – Naval History and Heritage Command,

On 26 October, the two navies would meet in one of the largest carrier battles of the Pacific War: the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands.

The Japanese had assembled a formidable fleet, including four aircraft carriers, under Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo. Their intention was to destroy the American carrier force and provide support for the renewed Japanese offensive on Guadalcanal. Waiting for them were two American carriers, USS Hornet and USS Enterprise, supported by battleships, cruisers and destroyers.

Espiritu Santo was very much part of the unfolding drama. American B-17 Flying Fortresses and PBY Catalina flying boats operating from the island were conducting long-range reconnaissance across the Solomon Sea. On the morning of the battle, a B-17 flown by Lieutenant Mario Sesso located elements of the Japanese fleet east of Malaita. Despite being attacked by Japanese Zero fighters, the bomber survived, bringing back valuable intelligence about the enemy's position and strength.

Meanwhile, American carrier aircraft had located the Japanese fleet, and the opposing forces launched waves of dive-bombers and torpedo aircraft against one another. The resulting attacks were devastating.



Japanese Heavy Cruiser, 1939 under air attack. Note the smoke coming from her bridge area, which had been hit by a bomb. Photo – Naval History and Heritage Command,

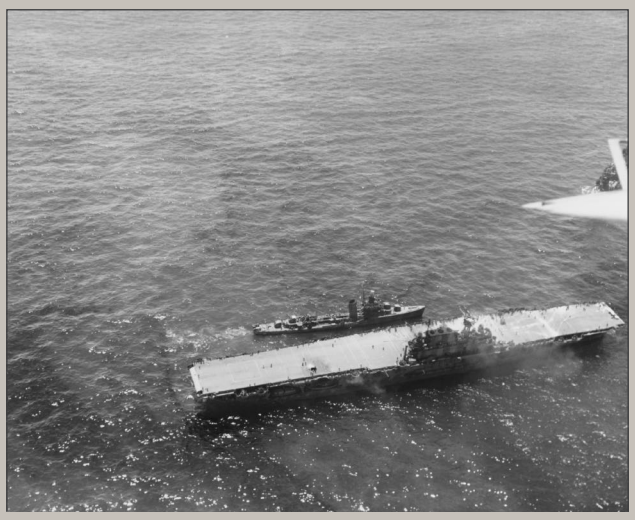
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USS Hornet was struck by multiple bombs and torpedoes. A damaged Japanese dive-bomber even crashed into her flight deck, starting further fires. Despite heroic efforts by her damage-control crews, the carrier was eventually abandoned. Repeated attempts to sink her by American gunfire failed, and Japanese destroyers finally finished the job with torpedoes during the night of 26–27 October.

USS Enterprise also suffered bomb damage but managed to remain operational, while several other American ships were damaged. The Japanese lost 99 aircraft and, more importantly, a devastating number of experienced pilots and aircrew.



A Japanese Type 99 shipboard bomber (Allied codename Val) trails smoke as it dives toward USS Hornet (CV-8). This plane struck the ship's stack and then her flight deck. Note anti-aircraft shell burst between Hornet and the camera, with its fragments striking the water nearby. Photo – Naval History and Heritage Command.



USS HORNET (CV-8) dead in the water with a destroyer alongside, 26 October 1942. Photo – Naval History and Heritage Command.

On paper, the Japanese had won. They had sunk Hornet and badly damaged Enterprise, forcing the American fleet to withdraw. But the victory came at an extraordinary price. The loss of experienced naval aviators proved far more damaging than the loss of aircraft themselves, and Japan would struggle to replace the expertise lost that day.

For the Allies, the battle reinforced an important lesson: aircraft carriers were now the dominant force in naval warfare. And for Espiritu Santo, it was another reminder that the island's airfields and reconnaissance squadrons were playing a direct role in some of the Pacific War's most significant battles.



Damage to the smokestack and signal bridge of USS Hornet (CV-8) after it was struck by a Japanese dive bomber. Smoke at bottom is from fires when the plane subsequently hit the flight deck. Photo – Naval History and Heritage Command.

When the Earth Moved

To the thousands of GIs stationed at Base Button on Espiritu Santo during World War II, the enemy wasn't the only threat to daily operations. While the northern Solomon Islands campaign raged, the personnel of the 13th Army Air Force—affectionately known as the "Jungle Air Force"—battled a relentless mix of tropical heat, mud, swarms of mosquitoes, and sudden natural disruptions.



Samuel Boylston stands in front of the 13th Army Air Force crest. Photo – Library of Congress.

Among those keeping operations running at the island headquarters in 1943 was Sergeant Samuel Lionel Boylston, a young clerk from Springfield, South Carolina. An artist at heart, Sam was famously known around camp for meticulously painting humorous cartoons on the envelopes of his letters home. But one afternoon, the comedy turned into a chaotic scramble when the very earth beneath their boots decided to give way.

The Earthshaker of Quonset Hill

Because Espiritu Santo's jungle floor was an unforgiving swamp of mud and decay, military engineers had constructed the 13th AAF Headquarters offices out of standard steel Quonset huts. To protect them from the frequent downpours and pooling water, these curved metal structures were perched precariously on steep hillsides, anchored only by thick pilings hacked out of local coconut palm trees. It was an efficient design for a temporary base, right up until the island's volatile tectonic geography woke up.

During a quiet afternoon shift in mid-1943, a severe earthquake struck Espiritu Santo. The subduction zone beneath the New Hebrides chain is historically one of the most seismically volatile spots on Earth, and this particular tremor was massive.

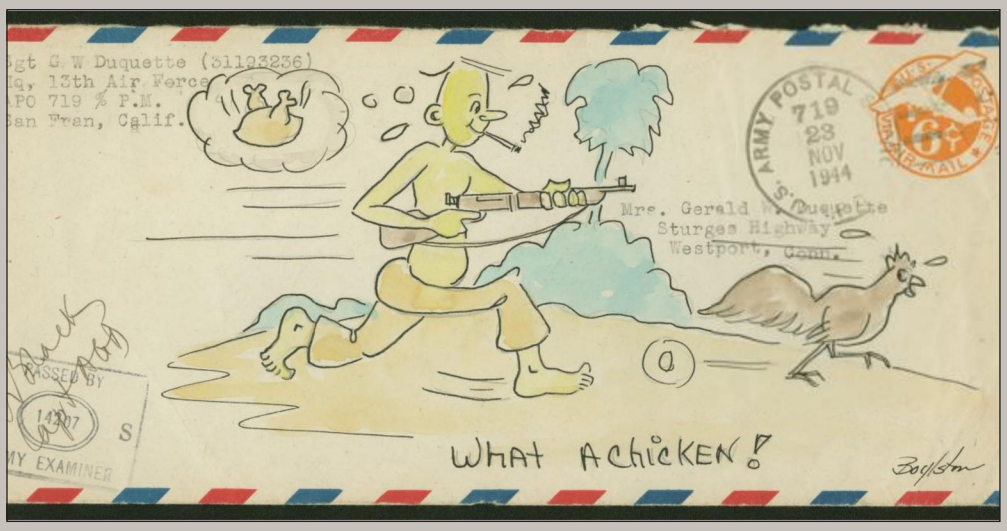
Within seconds, the deep rumble of the tectonic shift travelled up the hillside and violently shook the coconut pilings. Inside the main clerical hut, chaos erupted. The entire building began to pitch, groan, and slowly shear away from its foundation, tilting dangerously downward toward the valley.

Typewriters instantly transformed into projectiles, launching violently off the desks. Heavy wooden chairs flipped backward, sending clerks tumbling into heaps. Overhead, light fixtures snapped from their mounts, shattering loudly against the curved metal ceiling panels. Recognising that the entire hut was on the verge of sliding completely down the muddy slope, the men



One of Santo's Quonset huts being assembled on a hillside with coconut logs for stumps. Photo – US Archives.

(continued...)



One of the envelopes Sam Boylston illustrated, then sent home to family and friends. Photo – Library of Congress.

scrambled wildly in a frantic, undignified race toward the exit doors. Personnel practically poured out into the jungle mud, tumbling clear of the structure just as the shaking subsided.

When the dust settled, the Quonset hut had miraculously stopped moving, caught and securely wedged against a dense grove of native trees at a severe 30-degree tilt. Despite the terrifying ride, there were no major casualties—just a thoroughly rattled headquarters staff. For the next several days, until engineering winches could finally drag the heavy metal building back up the ridge line, clerks were forced to work inside the skewed building, typing out official military logistics reports entirely sideways.

Guerilla Warfare with Land Crabs

When natural disasters weren't threatening to launch offices down hills, Sam Boylston and his tentmates had to find creative ways to keep their morale afloat in the isolated Pacific theatre. For Sam, the local wildlife provided the perfect ammunition for psychological camp pranks.

Espiritu Santo was populated by massive populations of migrating land crabs—hardy, armoured crustaceans with formidable pincers that crawled out of the jungle by the thousands at certain times of the year. While most GIs viewed them as a loud, nocturnal nuisance scraping against the canvas of their tents, Sam saw them as the perfect comedic foil.

During the quiet evening hours, Sam would sneak out into the brush, carefully wrangle a few of the largest crabs he could find, and stealthily transport them back to his quarters. He would then slip the oversized crustaceans deep beneath the wool blankets of his tentmates' cots.

Later that night, exhausted soldiers would stumble back into the dark tents after long shifts, throwing themselves blindly onto their canvas beds. Within seconds, a chorus of startled, frantic swearing would pierce the jungle silence as cold, clicking pincers met bare skin. Men would launch themselves entirely out of their cots into the dark, frantically shaking out blankets while Sam stifled his laughter from across the tent. It was a simple, repetitive gag, but in a place dominated by malaria, long hours, and isolation, it was exactly the kind of levity the Jungle Air Force needed to keep going.



One of Espiritu Santo's huge land crabs known locally as coconut crans. One of these in your cot would certainly give you a fright. Photo – Facebook/Dinal Chandeepa

Then and now – Aore Island

Aore Island was a vital part of the enormous American military infrastructure established around Espiritu Santo during World War II. Far more than a tropical outpost, it became a major centre for fuel storage, recreation and some rather specialised wartime operations.

By July 1943, the Americans were constructing fifty 10,000-barrel fuel-oil storage tanks on the island, alongside additional facilities holding 20,000 barrels of diesel fuel, 17,000 barrels of motor gasoline and twenty-three 1,000-barrel aviation-gasoline tanks. An extraordinary investment in keeping the Pacific war machine running.



An aerial photo of the northern coastline of Aore island taken in 1943. You can clearly see the fuelling and mine loading jetty in the centre of the photo. Photo – US Archives.

Aore also offered a welcome escape from military routine. Its Fleet Recreation Centre, proudly billed as "The Finest in the Pacific", featured swimming, a soda fountain, beer parlour, nine softball diamonds, tennis and basketball courts, boxing rings, a theatre district and much more.

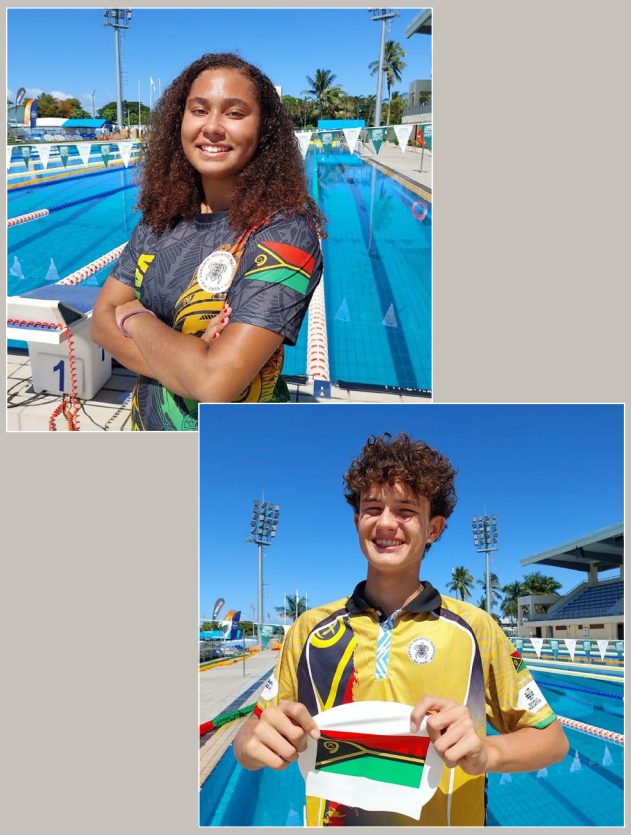
But there was another, less recreational side to the island. The sea-mine assembly workshops, visible towards the right of the 1943 photograph, were an important wartime facility. The square jetty was used to fuel and load mines aboard vessels for deployment at sea, including in the strategically important Segond Channel.



The same area of Aore Island taken in June 2024. The large square jetty is no longer there, but the mine assembly building slab and transport rails remain. Photo – Google Earth.

Inspiring everyday heroes

History is being made, with Vanuatu represented for the first time at the Youth Olympic Games in Dakar, Senegal. Swimmers Chloe Ameara (17) and Rémy Idieder (15) are carrying the nation's hopes onto the international stage.



Chloe Ameara (top) and Rémy Idieder. Olympc chamoions in the making. Photo – Supplied.

Rémy earned selection following an impressive debut at the Oceania Swimming Championships in Fiji, where he broke two senior and four junior national records. He has since been training at Brisbane Boys' College under National Head Coach Lachlan Milner.

Chloe has earned her sixth national team selection. She has continued training in Port Vila under local coach Josh Trowell while preparing for Dakar and sitting her final school examinations.

Rémy will contest the 100m freestyle, 100m backstroke, 200m individual medley and 50m backstroke. Chloe will compete in the 100m backstroke, 50m freestyle, 50m backstroke and 50m breaststroke.

The team is led by Vanuatu Aquatics Federation Technical Director Ben Howard, who will also coach.

For both swimmers, Dakar offers an opportunity to compete against the world's best emerging talent, gain international experience and represent their country with pride. And whatever the results, both have already made their mark. Vanuatu is on the Olympic stage, and this could be just the beginning.

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