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## Happy Birthday to us

On Friday, October 26th, the anniversary of the SS President Coolidge sinking, our project office and mini museum also turned one.

We're proud to record that nearly 4500 visitors have been to our home in Unity Park, Luganville. It's been a vindication of the Association's vision in creating a place where people can get a taste of the future of the Museum.

As well as that, there is growing range of exhibits on display, including a series of videos, and our friendly staff are always on hand to meet and greet.

Entry is free but we are often touched by the generosity of visitor donations, and we are also able to offer a small but growing range of local-themed merchandise. Proceeds help support our work.

Around 60 percent of our visitors are local people and its is very important for us, as we develop community understanding and support for what we are doing.

Our overseas visitors are also very important to us. Potential funders want to know that there is actually demand for a Museum, and the feedback we get is that there is. We keep track of our visitor numbers and what percentage of potential visitors we are receiving and from which countries.



*Our museum project office in Unity Park, Luganville . Just look out for our signs, and our four flagpoles. An inside shot of our office is as shown below.*

From that, we can look to grow as, hopefully, the cruise ship and air traveler numbers begin to build again over the next couple of years.

We hope that if you are visiting Espiritu Santo to then drop by - we're open 8am to 5pm weekdays, and whenever a cruise ship is in port.



Inspiring everyday heroes



Bob Hill



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### Our Milton video goes live



With the President Coolidge anniversary, we've been delighted to unveil our exclusive interview with museum member Milton Staley, 99 years old and survivor of the sinking.

Earlier this year, Milton's nephew Richard Staley and other family kindly recorded Milton telling of his wartime experiences, particularly on Espiritu Santo.

Milton spoke for well over an hour, and was full of fascinating stories; he did after all achieve the rare feat of serving in both the Pacific, and (including D-Day) the European theatre of operations.

Our video of the interview is a little shorter! At three minutes, it focuses on how Milt came to find himself in this remote part of the world - like his comrades, they knew very little about the South Pacific, but they soon learnt fast. Milt tells us of the moment the mines detonated under the Coolidge, sending him flying, and of the rescue operation.

You can now view the video on our website at [www.southpacificwwiimuseum.com](http://www.southpacificwwiimuseum.com)

That wont be all - Milton's story is due to feature in the next issue of Island Life magazine, and we will also be sharing that with our Museum members who receive the added value Santonian newsletter early next year.

A huge thank you is due to Milton, his family, and to board member and general creative wizard James (Jimmy) Carter who edited the finished video.

### Our gratitude to the late Janis Sheen



The Trust was saddened to hear of the recent passing of Janis Sheen. The Museum is currently restoring "Nellie", a 1942 Willys jeep, kindly gifted to us by Janis a number of years ago.

The jeep was originally acquired by her husband, the late Darrell Sheen. The Sheens lived on Aore island for a number of years. Darrell was a well-known film producer and director in Queensland



and the Jeep is understood to have appeared in at least one production.

It was named 'Nellie' as a tribute to the nurse in James Michener's Tales of the South Pacific, which were written after the author's experiences on Espiritu Santo and elsewhere during the war.

Our thoughts are with the Sheen family and we look forward to Nellie's restoration as a tribute to their generosity to us.

*Students from Luganville International School (LIS) visiting Nellie during a school tour organized by the museum project team.*



# On the trail of the Tales of the South Pacific



VSA Volunteer Kevin McCarthy giving passengers of The Spirit of Enderby an overview of the museum project and wartime history of Espiritu Santo, at the museum project office, Unity Park, Saturday 27 Oct 2018.

We recently did something a bit different for a small cruise ship, The Spirit of Enderby, which paid a one-day visit to Luganville. This is a small group tour from Heritage Expeditions, and working with local tourism operator, Santo Paradise Tours, we especially opened our project office on Saturday for 24 visitors. After a quick visit to us to see the context of just how big and important the Allied base was here, they set off to visit various World War Two sites.

One visitor from the ship however, had a different itinerary. Marita Grabiak, who had reached out to us earlier, asking if we could take her to the site of the former Aubert Ratard plantation.

Michener fan Marita Grabiak with our project manager Alma Wensi and VSA volunteer Kevin McCarthy (Image below)

It was there that Tales of the South Pacific author James Michener spent a lot of time, socializing with the French owner, and – so it is said – discovering the inspiration for the character of Bloody Mary. We weren't too sure if we could help, so we turned to our Facebook community for help. And they came back with many theories about where the property was. That was crucial in narrowing down where the likely location was.

So last Saturday, our project manager Alma Wensi took Marita to what we thought was the location, and it went very well. Marita knew the Michener information so well that she is convinced that this was the old Ratard property. There is clear evidence of an old plantation home, other buildings, and - a clincher – the sort of beautiful views out to Malo Island which were referred to by Michener, and an inspiration for his writing.

It's great when a plan comes together, and we've uncovered one more piece of lost history on Espiritu Santo.



What believed to be remnants of Ratard's wooden plantation house (Image Above)



## Inspiring Everyday Heroes



The subject of this month's Inspiring Everyday heroes walked through our project office a few days ago. Leina Isno was born in Port Vila, and raised on Malekula, but has built a career in nursing in New Zealand.

She has just returned from the borders of Myanmar where there has been an ongoing humanitarian

crisis coping with refugees from the Rohingya people. Leina was part of a NZ Red Cross team there.

While Leina lives in New Zealand now, she also loves to come home to her family, and knows that one day she will return for good to Malekula's South-west bay. She is already working to establish a children's museum there to help preserve the local language and custom, and is set to publish a children's book in six languages telling the stories to the younger generation.

But if that doesn't sound busy enough, Leina is about to start an exciting new stage at New Zealand's Otago Medical School, training to one day - she hopes - be a trauma surgeon.

*"Inspiring Everyday Heroes" is our Museum brand promise and means how the stories of yesteryear and our project can inspire today's new generation.*

Leina Isno and her father Peter, in our project office.



## The month in military history



A coloured picture of I-21. Courtesy of <http://www.combinedfleet.com>

While there was no combat on land in the New Hebrides, the surrounding waters were full of peril, as Japanese submarines operated and tried to sway the crucial battles in the Solomons.

The Japanese were fully aware that the US was building up a base on Espiritu Santo, so information was highly valued. On October 2, 1942 a floatplane launched from the submarine I-21 flew over this island on reconnaissance, giving the Japanese an early glimpse of what was being constructed.

Japanese submarines were unusual in that they often carried a scout plane, as their role was seen as supporting the battleships and other vessels of the Japanese fleet. But it's not true that they only targeted enemy warships.

I-21 had a very busy career, sinking a number of merchant vessels in the South Pacific. Her intrepid seaplane also flew over Sydney and Auckland, two other important Allied bases. She was reported missing in December 1943.

## Our latest edition of the Santonian

Every three months, Museum members receive the Santonian. It's a newsletter full of extras about the war in New Hebrides. This quarter's edition features the tale of a doomed bomber flight, and the memories of a veteran based here - including the night a Japanese submarine began shelling the airfields near Edward McKenna's foxhole.

We'd love you to become one of our members. To find out more about how you can directly support our work, go to:

[www.southpacificwwiimuseum.com/membership-2/](http://www.southpacificwwiimuseum.com/membership-2/)

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**"Inspiring everyday heroes"**



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