



Volume 04 Number 03

Unearthed. The stories of our dog tags

The Museum every so often receive dog tags. These tags were developed by some countries from the mid-19th century as a way to identify war dead, or to provide medical information for treatment.

It's estimated half a million service personnel came through Vanuatu during the war, so it's hardly surprising a few dog tags got left behind.

When we get a dog tag, we are blessed in having two US researchers who can't resist the challenge of finding out more. Francesca Cumano and Donna Esposito are experts at looking up service records and trying to learn who the person was, when they might have been here, and most importantly, who their descendants are.



These two dog tags have been sent home to the United States. Both tags were found by Tom Wason who lives on Aore Island.

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A generous donation

In March we were very fortunate to have donated to us a copy of "Task Force 9156 and Ill Island Command". Not, you would agree, the catchiest title.

But the slim 1983 book by retired US lieutenant-colonel, the late Richie Garrison is a treasure trove for us finding out more about the wartime history here.

Garrison was a senior officer in the US command structure based on Efate island and his book sheds new light on US operators in the New Hebrides. There are also some entertaining anecdotes, of course.

He wrote the book in the hope it would be of use to future historians, something we hope to see realized.

The donation of the book is thanks to Tom Kirchmeier.

Tom is a retired insurance executive living in Redmond, Washington which is close to Seattle.

Tom Kirchmeier, donor and new member (continue Page 2)



(The stories of our dog tags continues)

Thanks to such work, we were delighted in March to mail two dog tags back to the families in the United States. Donna spent a considerable amount of time trying to work out some of the quirks in the two dog tags. One was for "Virginia Wiesocki Ogneff" - but she never served in the military. Instead, her dog tags seems to have been a souvenir made for her. Virginia's surname was spelt wrong - it's Wysock -but the tag included her US address.

The allowed Donna to eventually reach a family member.

John Watson Wattenbarger's tag was a bit more straightforward, and Donna was able to establish that he had a long and varied war service - including narrowly missing the Pearl Harbor attack. He was in Espiritu for just 7 days, in May 1944, and Donna thinks the dog tag was left here for a reason.

"The dog tag is a typical US Navy tag, but the printing is going in the wrong direction. Also, there is a mistake in his service number and the last letter of his name is missions. So I'm guessing he probably threw his tag away intentionally, not guessing it would turn up again 75 years later!"

We thank both families for being so helpful upon being contacted by Donna. It is after all, not at all usual to have someone contacting you about your family out of the blue - and with some potentially surprising information.

It's a great inspiration for us to. The Museum has as one of its goal to be a place of remembrance for those who served in the South Pacific. These dog tags, back in the hands of the families in the US, are a very tangible way to realize that goal.

And if you're wondering , yes we do have other dog tags - with some interesting stories to tell.

We also thank Tom Wason of Aore Island who found these tags and brought them in for the museum.

- If you have a dog tag found in Vanuatu, and would like to have it investigated, with a view to returning it to family, we would love to hear from you. Contact info@southpacificwwiimuseum.com

(A generous donation continues)

A husband to Cathy of 51 years, and dad to three children and granddad to 3 others, he contacted us to try and find out more about his father's WWII service, including a number of months spend on Espiritu Santo.

"In the process of researching my father's military service, I discovered the museum in Vanuatu. Most of the United States individual military records for WWII were destroyed in a fire in the 1970's. We knew in general where my father served, but without much context. The museum has been very helpful in our efforts to add detail and context to our father's military service."

Tom's now a Museum member and a regular correspondent on matters of military. And we can't thank him enough for his generous donation of this book.

Our friends in the Solomons

The reason that Espiritu Santo and Port Vila became so crucial to the war in the South Pacific lies 650 odd miles to the north, where the Solomon Islands lie.

The Solomons of course was home to the climatic battles of 1942 which stopped the Japanese advance further south. By 1943, much fighting is still to be done as the Allies began to push further along the islands, including into Bouganville, and New Georgia.

The Solomons is thus rich with the relics of the wartime fighting on land, and the seas around are full of sunken warships and crashed aircrafts. It is rich also with the stories of the people who assisted the Allies, and of the heroism of the Coastwatchers who spied on Japanese ship movements.

We would like to publicise the work that's being done there by the Solomon Scouts and Coastwatchers Trust, which has been working to preserve the wartime history on the island since 2009.

They publish an informative newsletter and if you'd like to learn more, please contact the SSCT research officer, Emmanuelle Mangalle at: info@prideofournation.org.sb

A Walcott update

New Zealanders tend to do things differently. So this is not a memoir, or a dog tag. But a piece of wood.

Its almost a year since we visited the story of a piece of timber found on Espiritu Santo which carried words from a New Zealand serviceman serving on the island during wartime.

James Walcott had written his name, his address back home, and identifying number, and his dates of service.

We were delighted to publicise the finding with a New Zealand newspaper in his native city of Dunedin, and that in turn resulted in his daughter Jude hearing about the discovery.

She had been trying to find out more about her father's war service, and was thrilled to hear of the unlikely survival of the words her father had etched on the timber.

Jude's been doing some more research over the past year, and discovered that her father was in Espiritu Santo from November 1944 to November 1945, when he was discharged due to ill health.

He had worked in the canteen and stores area, and was promoted to sergeant, in charge of the canteen for No 5 flying boat squadron. The reason for his discharge was a peptic ulcer, thought to have been possible and ironically caused by "service food".

Jude says there's still more to find out if she can.

"I don't remember Dad ever talking about his time there (Espiritu Santo). I do remember he had an ulcer but never knew that connection. Eating plain biscuits and milk was something he did to manage it."

James Walcott returned to Dunedin after the war to eventually marry, and become a grocer.

Thank you Jude for sharing your research and we hope you find out more about your father.



Trust chairman Brad Wood with the Walcott timber last year

The month in military history

In March 1943, there took place a small naval battle in Central Solomons. While the US Navy had radar from 1942 on some of their warships, and the Japanese did not, that had not stopped many naval battles going against the American fleet. Most encounters at night saw the US ships much worse at fighting while the Japanese had long practiced such skills.

But in early March 1943, a task force of three cruisers (Montpelier, Cleveland and Denver) and three destroyers raced from Espiritu Santo under the command of "Tip" Merrill.

They had the dangerous task of bombarding Japanese forces in the Central Solomons ahead of an invasion there. Their mission coincided with the Japanese destroyers Minegumo and Murasame on a routine supply mission.

The first two destroyers knew was when the horizon lit up with flashes. They had been tracked by "Black Cat" PBV Catalinas with radar, and then picked up by the task force radar. The US ships opened fire by using only radar to track their shooting.

Inspiring Everyday Heroes

This month's Hero is little Jack Kalangis, a Vanuatu boy who for eight months, underwent life-saving and life-changing treatment at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital.


Jack, who is nearly three, was born with a large lump on his face. He lived with his mother on the remote island of Ahkamb and no-one realized that condition was potentially deadly. A couple of visiting Australian tourists saw Jack and their inquiries eventually led to the involvement of the Children First Foundation - and the young boy being flown to Melbourne for expert care.

Jack is now home. You can see the full story in a video here by Channel 7, Sydney at <https://bit.ly/2Hszgqf> or read more about the incredible treatment here at <https://bit.ly/2U6RY9j>



(Jack, picture from Herald Sun)

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

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"Inspiring everyday heroes"



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