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## A picture very few have seen

The latest edition (issue 35) of Island Life magazine includes an article by the Museum on Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry.

Before he became famous, he was a bomber pilot, flying many missions in the South Pacific, including out of Espiritu Santo.

One morning in 1943, young Lieutenant Eugene Roddenberry climbed onboard B-17 "Yankee Doodle". Their mission was a reconnaissance of the sea around the island, scanning for enemies.

It was 5:50am. There was still mud on the steel matting and coral runway no.2 from the regular tropical rain. A third of the way down the runway he realized that the B-17 was never going to develop enough power to take off. Gene tried to abort, throttling back and applying the brakes. But the brakes had failed completely. The bomber crashed into trees at the end of the runway.

Two men died but Roddenberry survived, meaning that one day he would create the famous science fiction world that continues to this day.

While we were researching, we wanted to pin down the details of that crash - because there was a suggestion it happened on Guadalcanal. Roddenberry's official biography says Espiritu, but

we sourced the official report - and discovered an extra bonus.

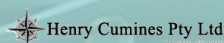
It was a never before published picture of the B-17 crash site. One of our historian friends and member, Donna Esposito, kindly paid the fees so that we could obtain this picture and report. It was very generous, and we thank her for helping us find out more about one of Espiritu Santo's most famous stories.



*What happened to Gene Roddenberry's B-17. It's amazing that most of the crew survived.*



Inspiring everyday heroes



Bob Hill



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## Our Navara is flourishing

The Museum started its Navara Fund just over a year ago, and it's been a great success in just 12 months.

The fund helps businesses and individuals contribute to the running costs of our project office/mini-museum, and our fundraising work.

There are now seven members. The foundation Navara Fund member, Air Vanuatu, recently signed for a second year.

Two new members joined just this month, so thank you and welcome aboard to Henry Cumines Limited and Telecom Vanuatu Limited.

Here's more on both companies.

### Telecom Vanuatu Limited.

The Vanuatu telecommunications company has signed a three year contract to provide high-speed communications services to the project office.



Visitors to the Museum project office enjoy using the interactive WWII map thanks to support of TVL



The Sydney based company started in 1966 as an export merchant specializing mainly with the Asia Pacific region. It has strong links to Vanuatu and has been an early supporter of the Museum project.

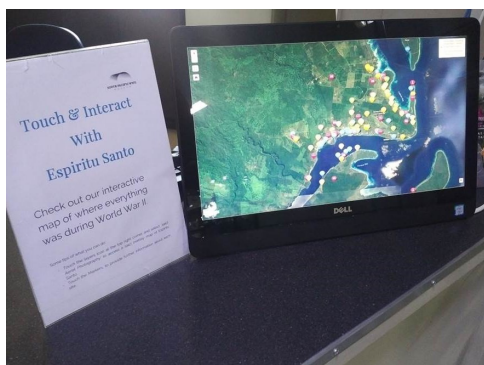
Helder Rodrigues of Henry Cumines Ltd says that the company founder, Mr Henry Cumines originally began traveling to the South Pacific region in 1946 before opening his own company in 1966.

"During this time, he provided assistance and pioneered many trade missions to Vanuatu and many other South Pacific nations by exporting high quality goods such as foodstuffs, medical supplies, general supplies and equipment from Australia and New Zealand."

"We believe it is our turn to give something back to our South Pacific neighbors especially Vanuatu which has shown tremendous support to our country over the many years and to secure the history that brought us all together in the way of a museum for the next generations to appreciate."

Project manager Alma Wensi says TVL is a great partner for the Museum. "Our vision is for a Museum that has a modern information technology and is interactive for our young generation. We look forward to working with Telecom Vanuatu Limited as a telecommunications leader in Vanuatu."

Barlen Lutchmoodoo, the chief executive officer of TVL, says it's great to be associating with the Museum project. "We are a company that deals everyday with the changes in technology and the differences we can make to people's lives. This is a project that is ambitious to do the same, and we are proud to be associating with it."



Visitors to the museum project office can use the TVL internet service to zoom in on an interactive map of old wartime sites.



David Lum, the Vanuatu agent for Henry Cumines Ltd is thanked by Alma

## Two long roads back to Espiritu Santo

When the small cruise ship Silver Explorer came to Espiritu Santo recently, it carried two guests with family stories connecting them intimately to this island from over 75 years ago.

Bob Leland was coming to the place where his father J.L. Leland had been a member of one of the famed Seabee construction battalions.

The Seabees did much of the building of the massive base here. J.L. Leland's unit was the 535th Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit. With just over 200 men, it arrived on Espiritu Santo in late 1943, and in a way never left - as the unit was disbanded in July 1945 while still on the island.

Meanwhile Teri Ellerbe was retracing part of her father Howard Rhone's eventful wartime service.

Howard Rhone had just turned 21 when his ship, the cruiser USS Astoria, was sunk in the crushing US naval defeat off Savo Island in the Solomons in 1942. The US fleet had just landed the Marines on Guadalcanal and was surprised late at night by a Japanese squadron.

Teri told us that her father did not speak much of that terrible night but did once recall being ordered to move towards the sick bay - and opening the compartment door to find there was simply nothing left on the other side.

Howard, a fitter, had already been present at the earlier famous battles of Midway and the Coral Sea with the Astoria.

Teri is still trying to piece together all his movements, but by 1944 he was serving at the boat repair unit

on Espiritu Santo, a site which we believe was only a short walk from our project office.

When Teri left us, her cruise ship was heading next to Guadalcanal, with a promise from the captain that she would be on the bridge as it sailed over the wreck of the Astoria, deep in the "Ironbottom sound".

Teri Ellerbe and husband Glenn



Teri's Father, Howard Rhone



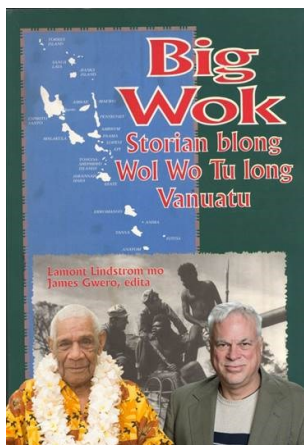
Son of a Seabee - Bob Leland with his wife Ruth.



## Your chance to obtain Big Wok

The passing of James Gwero, co-author of Big Wok, earlier this year sparked interest in the book, which was published just over 20 years ago.

Big Wok records the memories of World War II of the Ni-Vanuatu people, in the national language of Bislama.



Big Wok and authors Gwero & Lindstrom

James Gwero, who passed away in February 2019, joined with United States anthropology professor Lamont Lindstrom and others to gather stories for the book from more than 120 men and women in 1988 and 1989.

The interest prompted the Museum to try to source more copies of this rare work - and we were successful!

If you are interested in purchasing a copy of Big Wok, please contact us at [info@southpacificwwiimuseum.com](mailto:info@southpacificwwiimuseum.com)

## The month in military history

In April 1942 there took place one of the most remarkable air missions of the war in the Pacific, and while it happened thousands of miles away, it had an impact on the islands of the New Hebrides - where the war had barely begun.

On the morning of April 18, 1942, 16 B-25 bombers flew to Japan off the aircraft carrier USS Hornet from a point more than 650 miles offshore. It had never before been tried to fly big twin-engine bombers off a carrier.

The Japanese believed their homeland is safe from US attack because any American bases were too far away.

The Doolittle Raid did little physical damage, but the shock of the attack drove the Japanese Navy to undertake the invasion of Midway Island. That ended in disaster, with four Japanese carriers sunk. And that's where the New Hebrides connection can be made. If there was no Doolittle Raid and no Battle of Midway, then Japanese would have been much better placed to have advanced further south from the Solomons, to New Hebrides and beyond.

There's another connection to these waters. The USS Hornet was sunk in October 1942 in the Battle of Santa Cruz Island north of Espiritu Santo. Her wreck was found earlier this year by the late Paul G Allen's team.

## Looking out for our nation

Our Inspiring Everyday Hero is Vanuatu's first-ever permanent eye doctor, Dr Johnson Kasso. His story was recently featured in the New Zealand Herald Newspaper.

Last year, he completed his studies at the Pacific Eye Instituted in Fiji; graduating as a qualified ophthalmologist.

He has now returned to Vanuatu for the opening of the new National Eye Centre, supported by the Fred Hollows Foundation NZ, in Port Vila.

But Dr Johnson Kasso told the New Zealand Herald that at one time he was just another village boy on the island of Santo.

"I'm just fortunate to come this far," he said. "My childhood was kind of a very poor childhood - my father worked in a plantation looking after cattle and mending fences, cutting copra."

The New Zealand Herald reports the centre has had a 190 million vatu upgrade and will increase the island nation's eye surgery capacity from 200 to 800 per year.

"I must say that we are proud to have this facility in place," Dr Kasso told the newspaper.

He hopes the services will reach many in rural areas and also has another hope - to train more local eye doctors.


"I can't do it alone. I need people."

To donate to the Fred Hollows Foundation NZ, see <https://www.hollows.org.nz/donate>

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

*Dr John Szetu (L), Dr Johnson Kasso and Komal Ram, Pacific Diabetes Eye Diseases Programme Manager, at the opening of the Vanuatu National Eye Centre. Photo / Dean Purcesll, New Zealand Herald.*



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**"Inspiring everyday heroes"**



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