

The Lost Squadron

By Sonny Whitelaw

From wars emerge tales not only of honour and courage, but also of tragedy. Although the Pacific was a bloody battleground during WWII, Vanuatu remained virtually unscathed by Japanese attacks.¹ Home to literally millions of troops, Vanuatu became a final resting place for many brave men who escaped battle, only to die in the seas and swamps a few kilometres from 'home'.

One such tale begins with what was meant to be a straightforward Marine Corps training mission. On 5 May 1944, thirty six dive bombers took to the sky at Quoin Hill, North Efate, escorted by 12 Corsairs. The bombers were to navigate while the Corsairs flew a protective hatch weave at two and three thousand feet above them. This intricate formation was designed to protect both the bombers and Corsairs. As the fighter pilots busily worked their way across the sky, one of the second tour fighter pilots realised that something was wrong. The bombers had missed their target and both the squadrons were lost, somewhere over the Pacific.

Back at Quoin Hill, the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Gregory Weissenberger knew something was wrong when the mission had not returned on time.

He eventually made contact with them and, with the use of a radio homing device, a return heading to Quoin Hill of 070 degrees was relayed to the pilots. The larger bombers went on to land at Bauerfield, but the smaller, shorter range Corsairs were too low on fuel to make it back.

One of the surviving Corsair pilots, Captain James Vittitoe, described it like this, "To conserve fuel, I had the propeller on that ol' Corsair turning so slow I could almost count the revolutions, with just enough manifold pressure to maintain height." Despite the loss of flaps because of hydraulic pressure failure, Captain

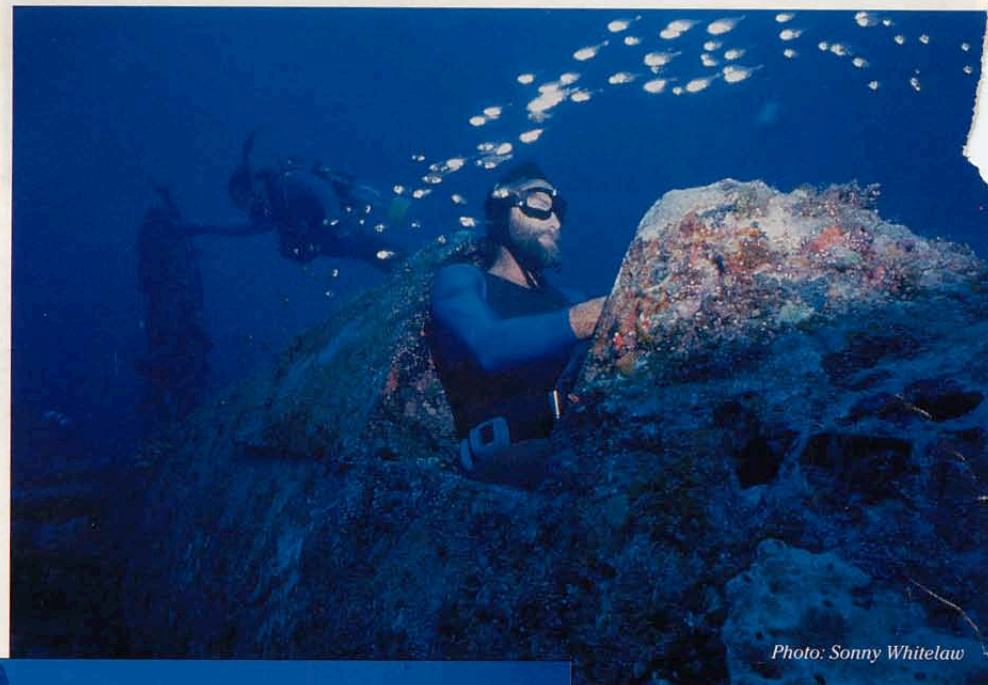


Photo: Sonny Whitelaw



two pilots died when their aeroplanes crashed between the beach and the airfield. Other witnesses said that, altogether, four pilots died.

As time passes, stories are embellished and they change. On North Efate the site of three crashed fighter planes has long been known. One, on Lelepa Island, was shot down during a target practice mission. To the north, just past Kakula Island, are the wrecks of two crashed Corsairs that we had often visited. One lies in the lagoon in around four metres of water and the second is Vittitoe's aeroplane.

Rumours had abounded about other aeroplane wrecks lying between Moso Island and a coral cay off Emoa Island and we wondered whether we could locate the missing aeroplane. Sifting through all the stories to try to get a better idea of their likely location was getting us nowhere. The best lead came from Keith Barlow, a pilot who came to Vanuatu from Queensland in the 1950's and who has spent many years flying the islands of Vanuatu. He told us that he'd flown over a third Corsair on the reef north west of Kaku Island and that in years gone by a cyclone had washed it off the edge of the reef. Our first thoughts were, "If only we could find what a great dive site it would be."

Vittitoe managed to land his aeroplane at the edge of the swamp near what is known today as Nagar Restaurant. He walked away, but the fate of his comrades was not so lucky.

Although some reports are conflicting, it seems that pilots may have been refused permission to land at Quoin Hill. Nine thousand Marines were stationed there and risking a crash landing amongst the aeroplanes and large cache of ordnance located at the base would have been too dangerous.

One pilot made a successful crash landing on the airfield at Havannah Harbour, while, according to Vittitoe, another

With Keith's information in mind, a marine chart in hand, and accurate knowledge of the location of the first two Corsairs, we plotted the most likely location and set off in search of the wreck. It was not a pleasant day on the water. The wind was gusting and it was cold, wet and gloomy. A strong current was running, even at a depth of 20 metres. But we had already anchored up-channel from the most likely location of the lost aeroplane and the thought of the impressive drift dive along the Kakula Wall was tempting.



Archive Photo: One of the two crashed Corsairs near Kakula Island

While my dive companions kept to the edge of the Wall, looking for the aeroplane, I roamed out into deeper water, knowing that if a cyclone had knocked it off the reef, it would not have simply dropped off the edge, but would have 'flown' some distance

before settling. I was not looking for an aeroplane *per se* (the underwater world deceives us by growing over everything and changing its appearance) but for any unusually shaped bommie.

Suddenly there it was before me. A completely round bommie with fluted serrations that Mother Nature had never made! It was the engine, and those curving pieces of coral off to one side were the bent and twisted propeller. Excitedly I signalled to my companions, who circled the 'bommie' once before realising what it really was.

I surfaced immediately to take landmark bearings and watched my husband anchoring the dinghy to a nearby coral head. Although he'd painstakingly done the calculations, his estimations had been based on second hand stories and lines drawn on a chart. He turned to me in amazement when I casually remarked that we'd found her. Perhaps not quite true, but where there was an engine... and sure enough, at a depth of thirty metres, just ten metres further down, we later found one of the lost Corsairs resting in a beautiful garden of colourful gorgonian sea fans.

It's difficult to describe the overwhelming elation and wonder I felt when I discovered this new underwater wreck - even if it had only taken me a painless twenty minutes to find. What made it more exciting was that the plane was

intact. The canopy had been pushed back and I wondered whether the pilot had managed to escape. Apart from the damage done as the plane slid off the reef to her final resting place, this Corsair looked to be in good condition. Inside her cockpit a painted crayfish had set up house under the seat and beneath the growth of coral and bryozoan, the instruments glittered intact.² Surprisingly, the joystick still moved the rudder back and forth, and the openings for the 20mm guns in the wings were clearly visible. Beautiful soft corals sprouted from the distinctive gull wings and cardinal fish presided over a now open side hatch.

But as I sat in the tiny cockpit and placed my hand on the joystick, I thought of that brave young man who had last sat there before me, of the futility of his mission. I mentally saluted him and those others like him who perished nearby during that war not so long ago.

Scuba dives to the Corsair for a minimum of 8 divers can be arranged through Sailaway Cruises (23802) and Pro Dive (23388).

Dinghy trips to snorkel the shallow Corsairs can be organised through Nagar restaurant, North Efate.

- ¹ One aerial attack of Santo killed Bessie the cow.
- ² Sadly, since its discovery, the instruments have been plundered from this Corsair's cockpit by thoughtless divers.