

Travel Tales

The Mysterious Plane Wreck on the North Shore of “Bali Hai”

Part 1

by

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“I was about 12 in 1943 or 1944 when the plane came screaming down out of the sky,” said Chief Charly Bani of north Ambae, in the Republic of Vanuatu, when I interviewed him in 2001. “Our village of Nanako was preparing for a wedding, and the plane just missed killing all 100 people in the wedding party! It hit a breadfruit tree, crashed into the ground, and broke into five pieces with a big fire and explosion. We all ran away, thinking we were under Japanese attack. But then we saw a parachute off to the west, near Ndui-Ndui. The pilot landed safely in a coconut tree, climbed down, and turned out to be a good-looking American. He was picked up the next day by a flying boat, and went back to his base on Espiritu Santo.”



**Chief Charly Bani and the Ambae
WW II air wreck**

The Chief pointed to the ground. There, next to his thatch house, was the massive engine and half a propeller from the plane that had almost killed him.

I met Chief Charly on an expedition to Ambae, in Vanuatu (ex-New Hebrides) when I was trying to find traces of World War II on the island, also known as Aoba, the Lepers’ Isle, or “Bali-ha’i” from *South Pacific*. His fascinating account left many questions: What kind of plane was it? Who was the pilot? Why did he crash? Was he really American? What happened to him? Neither the Chief nor anyone else in the village knew. I resolved that someday I would answer those questions.

Fast forward to 2012. I was offered a great job in the Vanuatu Prime Minister’s Office, under the Chief Information Officer. I knew the time had come for some serious research. Before I left my home in Silver Spring, I contacted the National Archives, the US Air Force and US Navy, Library of Congress, and numerous other sources. But it wasn’t until I found a huge on-line private resource called Aviation Archaeological Investigation and Research (www.aviationarchaeology.com), that I hit pay dirt.

This compilation of World War II “unit war diaries” had two short references to an Aoba crash that looked promising. One said: “17 May 1944, F4U-1, engine failure, pilot uninjured, off Aoba island, picked up by crash crew” and the other for the same day said, “2nd Lt. John E. Date, VMF-211 (US Marines Fighting Squadron 211), jumped, forced to bail out near Aoba Island when his plane developed engine trouble and finally failed. Plane (serial number 56076) not recovered.”

I had enough information to launch another on-the-ground effort.

I turned to the famous Explorers Club of New York City for endorsement. The Club, of which I am a member, kindly allowed me to carry Flag 101, which had an illustrious history dating back to 1940, including scientific expeditions to Liberia, the Arctic, Irian Jaya, Ethiopia, Greenland, Mt. Everest, and in the search for Amelia Earhart. No Club Flags had ever before been granted for expeditions to Vanuatu. I determined to document numerous aspects of Ambae, including its dangerous volcano, poor emergency evacuation plan, pig-killing cult and stone-moving ceremonies. But I knew that trying to solve the mystery of the plane wreck would be the most challenging part of the expedition.



**Lt. John E. Date, Jr.,
USMC aviator**



I visited Ambae several times over the course of a year, studying the five parts of the rusted wreck, interviewing villagers, and trying to match their eye-witness or second hand accounts with the information in the unit war diaries. I was able to assemble 19 separate proofs that indeed the plane in Nanako was the plane of Lt. Date. I never found the plane’s serial number, which only was located on two places on the plane, and must have been destroyed or disappeared over the years. But I found part numbers which matched the part numbers on an F4U-1 Corsair, found the letters “USN” in tiny letters on plane parts (the Marines flew US Navy planes), and matched the number of cylinders and propeller size to the right type of plane. The clincher was finding

an eyewitness, August Matthew Aru, who said the wreck was so terrifying and fascinating to him as a 10-year-old that he always remembered that crucial date – May 17 – and thought about it each year on that day for the rest of his life.



Lew and August Matthew Aru, eyewitness to the crash

With the help of Aru and other witnesses and documents, I was able to develop a better account of the incident. I will tell you about that next month.

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Lew Toulmin is a co-founder of the private Missing Aircraft Search Team. His 228 page report on his expedition to Ambae and the Nanako wreck is on file at the Vanuatu Cultural Center, the Explorers Club, and the Royal Geographical Society (and is available in pdf form on this website).