

# Solving the Mystery of the Plane Wreck on the North Shore of “Bali Hai”

## Part 2

by

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Last month I described my research into a mysterious air wreck in the Republic of Vanuatu (ex-New Hebrides) on the north shore of Ambae, the real “Bali Hai” from *South Pacific*. From unit war diaries, matching part numbers, and interviews with villagers, I was able to build up a detailed version of the crash.



**Lew and Andrew Vanua and the Explorers Club Flag at the Corsair wreck site**

The plane was an F4U-1B Corsair, one of the most famous and successful fighters of World War II. It was flown by Lt. John E. Date, Jr. of the US Marine Corps Reserves. He was returning from a patrol of the Solomon Islands and came in from the northeast, his Pratt and Whitney R-2800 engine sputtering and sounding “no gut,” according to eye-witnesses on the ground.

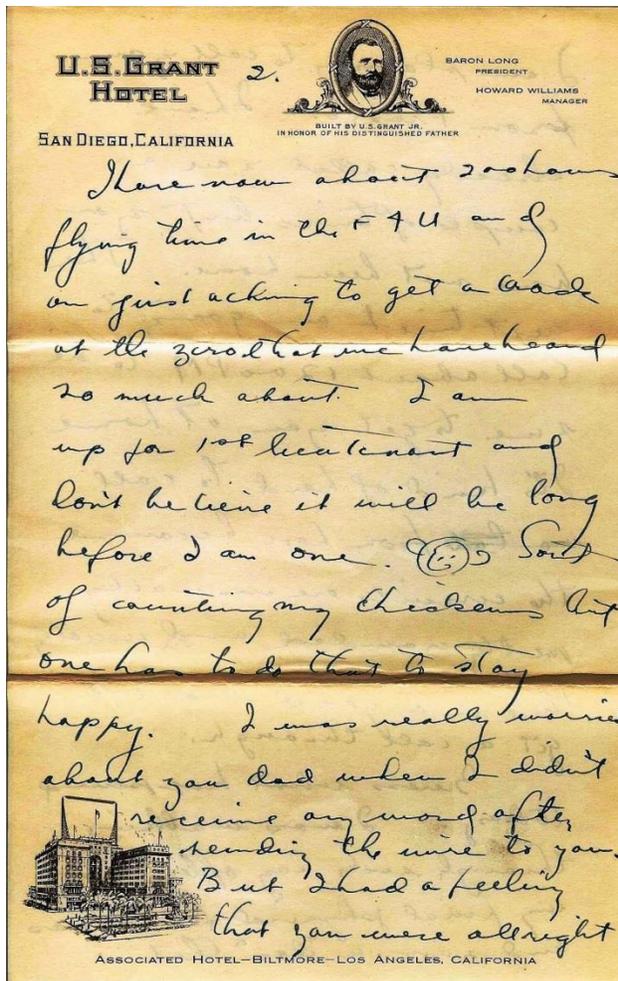
Lt. Date flew over Nanako village, then he carefully swung it around 180 degrees, so he could bail out and put the plane into the water, thus letting the north wind carry him ashore while the plane hit the sea. He called his base on the radio, saying he was ditching “off Aoba,” and this was recorded in his unit’s war diary. Then he bailed out. But the plane turned back again, probably affected by the wind, and came crashing into the village, almost hitting a wedding party of 100 people. It broke into five large pieces and burst into flames. The fire “cooked off” the .50 caliber ammunition, and the villagers fled the hail of bullets. Luckily no-one was hurt.

Half a mile away, Lt. Date parachuted gently into a coconut tree. Once he climbed down, he was approached by two villagers, James Viratafuti and George Wilbur. Date was alarmed and pulled out his Colt .45 pistol and pointed it at the villagers, demanding they keep away, and asking if there were Japanese around. Viratafuti said in the local pidgen, “Sori, no gat!” He reassured Date that all the locals were friendly, and took Date to the local Church of Christ mission, where he called his base by radio and stayed overnight. Date was picked up the next day by a PBY flying boat. He survived the war, after bombing Japanese positions in New Britain and serving in the Philippines.

While in Nanako, I learned that other researchers, from an air museum, had investigated the wreck several years before, and had even bought part of the wreck to take to Australia. No one knew who they were. So I started calling all the air museums in Australia, and eventually found the Classic Jets Fighter Museum, outside of Adelaide, owned by the delightful Bob and Margaret Jarrett. They and 25 volunteers were half way through an impressive six year project to build an F4U-1 Corsair, using parts from the Nanako wreck and from six other wrecks from around the South Pacific, as templates. They did not know the background of the Nanako wreck and were very pleased to learn the story of the pilot.



**The team from the Classic Jets Museum in Adelaide, Australia, restoring and recreating a Corsair, using parts of the Nanako plane and other planes. The plane is green and silver, on the right above the flag and sign of the Expedition.**



**Letter from Lt. Date in which he says (line 3) that he is "aching to get a crack at those Zeros we've heard so much about."**

Next I tracked down the later history of Lt. Date. After the war he lived near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, working as an engineer. He became a Captain in the Marine Corps Reserves, and died on 7 September 1973, aged 52. He left a wife and five children.

I located his family in Arizona, and learned that Date never talked much about the war, but once said that he "put a plane down near an island."

His family was fascinated by the details of the wreck. They generously gave me copies of Lt. Date's war letters, in which he stated that he was "aching to get a crack at the Zeros."

The Jarretts in Adelaide kindly agreed to donate some original parts from the Nanako plane to the Date family, as a fitting tribute to Lt. John E. Date's war service.

The mystery of the Nanako wreck was well and truly solved.

Lew Toulmin is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and has worked on various missing aircraft and missing person cases. He lives in Silver Spring and Port Vila, Vanuatu.