

Travel Tales

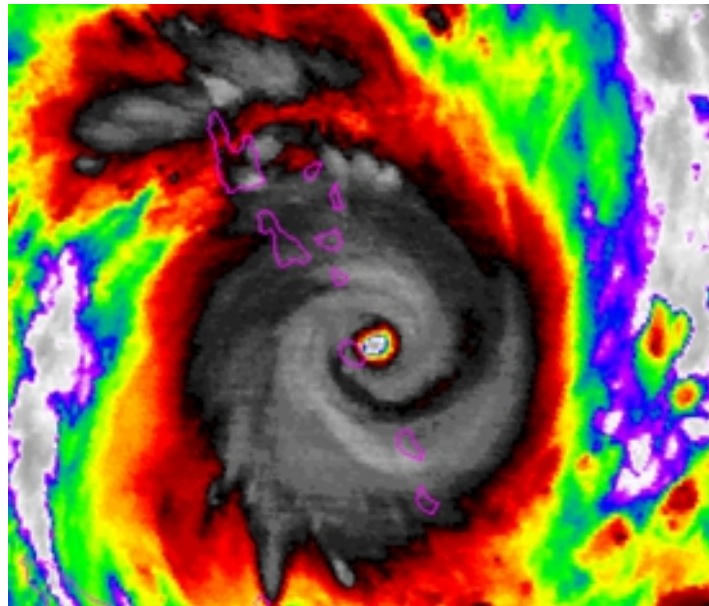
Cyclone Pam Flattens the “Happiest Country on Earth”

President vows “We will rebuild our paradise”

by

Lew Toulmin

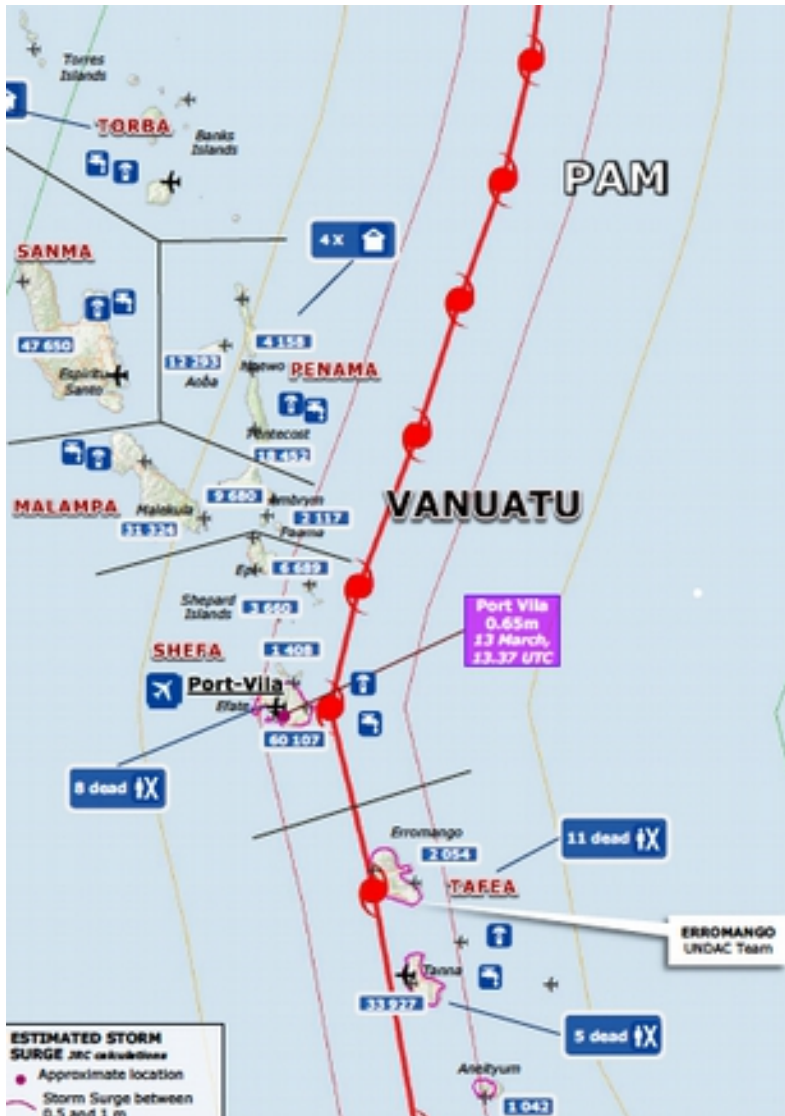
Friday, March the 13th, 2015 was the unluckiest day in the history of the 45-year-old South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu. Twice rated as the “happiest country on Earth,” on that unhappy day Vanuatu was struck by the worst Pacific storm in living memory, Cyclone Pam. This killer Category 5 hurricane packed winds of up to 180 miles per hour, with gusts up to 200 mph.



Category 5 Cyclone Pam was the worst in Vanuatu's history

The cyclone had a devastating effect on homes, schools, clinics and hospitals, ranging from 20 to 90 percent destruction on the 22 affected islands, of the 65 inhabited islands in the archipelago.

Vanuatu had previously been known as the New Hebrides, and ironically was the setting for the famous play, movie, record and TV mini-series *South Pacific*. This World War II musical comedy/drama portrayed the islands as a lush, green and romantic paradise. After Cyclone Pam,



Cyclone Pam hit the capital island of Efate and most of the southern islands

track over a week in advance, using advanced computer modeling.

Those massive thunderstorms gradually merged, started to swirl clockwise, and headed south. The new cyclone, now named Pam, headed right towards my apartment on the capital island of Efate. Pam first skirted the eastern edge of the islands of northern Vanuatu, hitting coastal villages with high winds and storm surge. Then Pam’s vicious eyewall hit the eastern shore of Efate, affecting the entire island and damaging 70-90 percent of the homes in the capital, Port Vila.

In my apartment building (billed as “disaster-proof”), the roof was ripped off and all the upper floor units were trashed. My former apartment, on the ground floor, was less damaged but was

a better description might be “battered, brown and depressing.”

I have a very personal connection with Vanuatu, since for the last 33 months I worked as an advisor in e-government for the Chief Information Officer in the Prime Minister’s Office of Vanuatu. My contract ended just nine days before Pam struck, and I had been back in Silver Spring for just a day when I heard that weather forecasters were saying that a “Vanuatu Monster Storm” was gathering in the Pacific, north of the Equator.

I looked at the same satellite photos the forecasters were using, and thought they were crazy. All I saw was a bunch of huge thunderstorms, 1500 miles north of Vanuatu, with no circular motion, no “eye,” and no southward movement. But the forecasters were insistent, and they were right – they managed to forecast a nascent killer cyclone’s

still uninhabitable. But at least the walls were standing – most Port Vila residents were not so fortunate.



Lew Toulmin's apartment was destroyed by Cyclone Pam, but he had departed 9 days earlier

Then the cyclone headed SSE and made almost direct hits on the southern islands of Erromango, Tanna and Anatom, smashing numerous villages. Although the total property loss was immense, the official death toll was only 11 -- but many islands have yet to be surveyed.

Communications are vital in any disaster response and recovery, but only one cell tower was standing in the entire country. Forty expensive satellite phones were brought in for government officials, and the largest cell phone provider, Digicel, managed to restore most of its national network links in an incredible five days. Overall preparation and response was hampered by the lack of a tested, multi-hazard national disaster plan, and many officials apparently went home during the government “state of emergency” that was declared.

When I first arrived in-country, I was told by a very senior official that, “Vanuatu virtually never gets hit by cyclones, because we have excellent sorcerers who can steer the storms away.” Apparently those sorcerers also stayed home, just before the storm hit.

On many islands, Pam flattened the “gardens” that ordinary families use to feed themselves every day. A typical garden for a poor, subsistence farming family usually includes yams, papayas, bananas, watermelons, tomatoes, island cabbage, kava, sweet potatoes, sugar cane and coconuts. This yields a very healthy vegetarian diet which is sometimes supplemented with fish

and pork. But typical disaster relief supplies are likely to contain lots of rice, a carbohydrate which has already recently been replacing the healthy island diet, and has led to high rates of diabetes and stroke.



Schools were badly affected – here books are spread out to dry after the storm

Potable drinking water has been another huge problem. The cyclone dumped nine inches of rain on Efate in just 30 hours, so it would seem like water wouldn't be a problem. But in many areas the water catchment systems were damaged, and of course there is no municipal water in the numerous outer island villages. So within days, reports arrived of desperate out-islanders drinking sea water – a dangerous practice.

One of the most effective first responders to the crisis was ProMedical, the only ambulance and rescue service in the country. In the first two weeks after the storm, the ProMedical team of



An Australian GlobeMaster plane brings relief to stricken Vanuatu

seven professionals and dozens of volunteers delivered 60,000 liters of pure water, purified 200,000 liters, and delivered tons of canned goods to remote, stricken villages on Efate.

Vanuatu President Baldwin Lonsdale blamed climate change for the storm's ferocity. He said that normally Vanuatu was a

“paradise,” and vowed that the “people of the nation will stand united together and build a new paradise.”

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Lew and Susan Toulmin live in Silver Spring, and he has been researching Vanuatu since 1994. Hurricane relief donations can be sent to ProMedical at www.gofundme.com/promedical.

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