

# Plunge back in time at Espiritu Santo's world-class diving sites



Visit the remains of Espiritu Santo's military past and hear the compelling tales of how Santo came to host over 500,000 US military personnel during World War 2.

Espiritu Santo boasts some of the best diving sites in the world. This in fact is due to the interesting military history of the island, which is the cause for much of the development that we see in Santo today. Two of the most renowned diving sites in the world exist in just a stone's throw from Luganville, and are the legacy of the largest military bases to be constructed in the Pacific during World War 2.

## A brief history of Espiritu's decorated WW2 past

In 1942, the need to locate a new airfield site further north and within flying distance of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands urged a reconnaissance party of three men to leave Efate in search of a new airfield site. Espiritu Santo was chosen as the base and on July 8, The Navy Construction Battalion, also known as the Seabees, arrived in Santo to begin work on constructing the new airstrip in Turtle Bay.

The Seabees were given just 20 days to cut through jungles and clear and level the surface for a 1,829-metre runway. Without the use of heavy grading equipment, all the Seabees had at their disposal were six tractors, two scrapers, one grease truck, one petrol wagon, three weapon carriers, and a generator. The 20 day work was successfully completed by the Seabees who were assisted by 90 marines, 295 infantrymen and 50 indigenous New Hebridean men.

On July 28, the first fighter squadron landed on the finished airstrip and thus began the history of Espiritu Santo. The military base became one of the largest of the US military's Pacific bases constructed after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in World War 2.

## USS President Coolidge

The USS President Coolidge was a luxury liner turned troop carrier. There were approximately 5,000 troops on board. After an error in communication, the Coolidge had hit friendly mines at the entrance to Segond Channel, and within 45 minutes, the ship sank to the seafloor. Captain Henry Nelson, knowing the ship was lost, tried to run her aground and ordered the troops to disembark, thinking that they would return the next day to salvage the cargo on the ship.



However, the captain's attempt to ground the Coolidge was blocked by a coral reef, and President Coolidge turned on her side and slid down the slope into the channel, carrying with her all belongings of the soldiers and military equipment in her holds, where they can still be seen today.

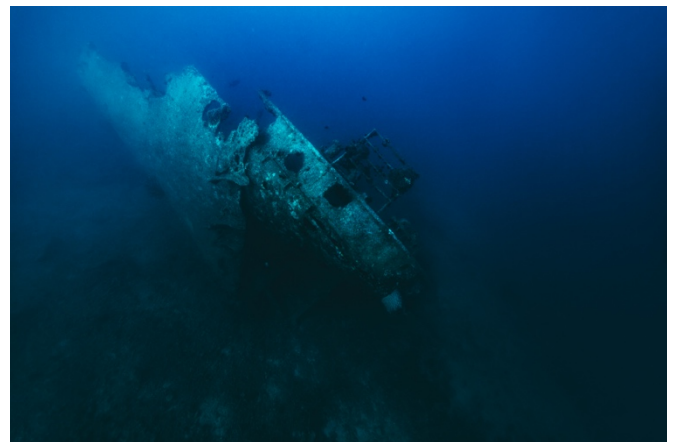
Today, the USS President Coolidge is considered to be one of the best wreck dives in the world due to the sheer size, intact interior and numerous items that were left behind by the troops. According to frequent divers, the Coolidge is filled with places to explore and there's something new to see on every single dive; even a week of diving the Coolidge is not enough to uncover all of the secrets of the former cruise liner.



## Million Dollar Point

In 1945, when the second world war was coming to an end, the US military began disassembling the US army base with the intention of selling some of the surplus military equipment and supplies to the local Condominium government at the price of 10 cents in the dollar.

However, the Franco-British government at the time refused to purchase the goods, thinking that they would be able to help themselves to it for free once the US military had left, knowing there was no way that the US ships could take every single piece of equipment back. Not intending to give anything away for free, the military chose to dump millions of dollars worth of assets into the sea. Today, this site became known as the Million Dollar Point.





Million Dollar point is a popular recreational site where divers can see sunken landing craft, jeeps, six-wheeler trucks, gigantic bulldozers, forklifts, semi-trailers, tractors, large bound sheets of corrugated iron, sealed boxes of clothing and of course the famous crates of Coca- Cola. Diving at the Million Dollar point is a must, because it allows divers to view an incredible mixture of sea life among the relics of Espiritu Santo's remarkable past.

For more information, visit our Vanuatu Tourism page on Facebook ([fb.com/VanuatuTourismOffice](https://fb.com/VanuatuTourismOffice)) or call us on 22813.

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