



Log of *S/V High Drama*

No.16 Vanuatu

October 1, 2002

Gut blong lukyu! (Good to see [look] you!)

Mi glad tumas lukim yu! (Literally I am glad too much to look you!) Bislama, a form of Pidgin English, is the national language of the Ripublik blong Vanuatu or the Republic of Vanuatu. This Log describes our adventures in Vanuatu, a South Pacific country full of contradictions and surprises. Formerly known as The New Hebrides, some Vanuatu people practiced cannibalism as recently as 1969. One island hosts a cult that worships John Frum (John “from” America?) We peered into a live volcano, we snorkeled over \$1,000,000 of US Army equipment that the Army shoved into the sea after WW II, and we learned the importance of a namba! Once again local people who lacked material possessions shared their lives with us. While waiting for a Presbyterian wedding ceremony on a remote island we chatted with local people who fetch their water from a community well, live without electricity, plumbing, televisions, radios, and stoves. Upon learning that we are Americans they expressed heartfelt concern about September 11.

The more we travel, the more we miss family and friends. We certainly enjoy hearing from you, even if you think that you are describing only the mundane. We welcome news about you and appreciate feedback on our website. We receive email by radio, even at sea. Write to us at WCX7992@sailmail.com which has the best reception now, but we still access KD7GHW@winlink.org.

The Passage from Fiji to Vanuatu

Nine-thirty represented an early start for us. Also, no wind stirred yet at that hour. The weather forecasts opined that a high-pressure area would roll right under us and produce steady 15-20 knot winds for the next 5 days. We cleared the reef at Malolo lailai Island, Fiji and headed for the open sea. Our destination: Tanna Island at the south end of the chain of islands comprising the Republic blong Vanuatu. The winds came up, first a pleasant 10-15 knots, then a lively 15-20 knots, and then a gusty 25-30 knots, then boisterous 30-35 knots. Darn! We guessed the weather wrong again! The seas continued to build on our port quarter and started breaking at about 4-5 meters. Another first for the stalwart crew of **High Drama**: we were green! Yes, although Ann made some Classic Chicken Rice and Mushroom Soup Minnesota Hot Dish for the trip, it stayed in the refrigerator for two and a half days. Water and crackers provided sustenance, while we joked about our latest diet fad. On the third day the winds subsided to 20 knots and the seas flattened somewhat. Hungry for a meal, we ate the Classic Chicken and Mushroom Soup Minnesota Hot Dish, cold.

High Drama's main cockpit is in the center of the boat, and we have always been quite dry under sail. Ann was surprised one morning when an uninvited wave smashed on the port side and swept her off the cockpit seat onto the floor. She looked around and found herself seated in about a foot of water that then drained out the scuppers. These uninvited boarding waves, including one in the aft cockpit, represented another first for us. We have never had any green water in the cockpits before.

After 3 days and 485 miles **High Drama** anchored in Port Resolution on the Island of Tanna. This author's hero, Captain James Cook anchored here 224 years to the month before us, in 1784, and named the protected bay after his ship.

Vanuatu: Land of Contradictions

Colonial powers France and Britain left their mark on Vanuatu. Both claimed sovereignty over the land, but neither was willing to give citizenship to the indigenous Ni-Vanuatu people. They were officially stateless! France and Britain jointly administered the New Hebrides, as Vanuatu was previously known, as a "condominium." Two reigning governments produced two sets of laws, two police forces, two prisons, and two sets of administrators. Visitors could choose which set of laws they desired to follow. In Tanna, one village spoke predominantly English while the nearby village, less than a mile away spoke French. In 1980, after a long struggle, the New Hebrides achieved independence as The Republic of Vanuatu.

The Languages



Some signs are in 3 languages, some just one language.



Some signs are in 3 languages, some just one language. Literally: LOOK OUT
Suppose you steal, the police I know will prosecute you

The people who live in the 83 islands that comprise Vanuatu speak 105 different languages, an average of a different language for every 1200 people. One writer refers to Vanuatu as “the world’s most complex linguistic jumble.” Some Ni-Vanuatu people speak English and others speak French, as well as their village tongue. The national language of Vanuatu since independence, a form of Pidgin English known as Bislama, is understood by 90% of the people. Pidgin English developed as a traders’ language in the 19th century. Even in Parliament Bislama is spoken and simultaneously translated into English and French. Some examples of this wonderful language follow:

See you later, Good Bye : Lukim yu afta. Tata
Thank you for your help: Tankyu tumas long help
How much?: Hamas?
To pay: pem

How much is one lemon?: Mi pem hamas wan lamem? (Literally, Me pay how much (for) one lemon?)

someone you don't agree with: wan krangke man

(Susan Corbin at the Bowman and Brooke law office in Phoenix sometimes referred to Jeff as "cranky"!)

mentally ill: hed blong em i no strait Literally: Head belongs to him is not straight

child: pikinini (An expression used by a governor in Arizona that contributed to his downfall)

womb: basket blong pikinini

piano: Bigfala bokis blong waetman, tut blong em sam I blak, sam I waet; taem yu kilim emi singalot

(Literally, Big box that belongs to whiteman or European, with some white teeth and some black teeth; when you hit it, it sings out.)

Prince Charles: Nambawan pikinini blog Kwin (Literally, Number one pikinini belong Queen.)

What time does the plane land? Plen I foldaon long wanem taem? (Literally, Plane it falls down at what time?)

Port Resolution on Tanna Island



The Port Resolution Yacht Club sign



Kids greeting us at Port Resolution



Adults greeting us at Port Resolution with green leis



Fred being greeted by Nora



Ann receiving lei also.

O our first day in Port Resolution on Tanna Island the Port Resolution Yacht Club prepared a feast of local foods : a roast suckling pig, chicken, taro, yams, fresh papaya juice, bananas, and a local specialty called "lap lap" which is root pulp wrapped in banana leaves and pit roasted and served with a coconut milk sauce. The Yacht Club, a project of a cruiser 10 years ago, is one of the few sources of cash for the village. They also built four rustic tourist huts that rent for \$25 US per day, meals included. The village has a generator for refrigeration and they sometimes sell cold Tusker, the local brew. They villagers raise vegetables and fruit; they fish and raise pigs for meat, but there is no excess for them to sell in a commercial quantity. They survive on a subsistence level, almost as they did when Captain Cook first landed here.



The Feast Table

Ronnie, the Yacht Club Commodore and new Chief

Two weeks before we arrived the village chief died. Ronnie, shown above is the new chief. While some islands select chiefs from men who pass successively more difficult feats and expensive feasts (in term of the number of pigs) Port Resolution's chiefs are born into the line of succession.

The John Frum Folks

After the feast, villagers came into the club and sat in the floor and sang songs for an hour. The harmony was excellent. During a pause, we asked about the meaning of the songs. We expected that the answer would be that the melodies were Christian hymns but the words carried more traditional messages. However, we learned that the entire village of Port Resolution worshipped John Frum. This religion is a local and personal one. According to doctrine, John Frum came to Tanna in 1942 and told the people that he would return and when he did, all of their material and spiritual wants would be met by his cargo, "like magic" one fellow said. Until he returns, Frum left some guidelines for leading a good life that the villagers explained were very much like Christian principles. The cargo cults had a foothold before WWII, but when the Americans arrived in Efate and Luganville to build supply bases for the Navy, these islanders saw trucks, refrigerators, food, medical supplies, Coca Cola cases, and an astounding amount of material wealth roll off ships for three years. The Americans hired 1,000 men from Tanna to come north to work at building airstrips and ship repair facilities. Some people believe that John "from America" may have been a recruiter for the labor force but the origin of John Frum is not exactly clear. Similarly, just where John is located now draws different answers from different people. Some people believe that he is in America gathering more goods, while others believe that he has an army of 5,000 men and he lives beneath Mount Yasur, the nearby active volcano. A fellow named Fred in a neighboring village claims to be a prophet of John Frum's and established a village called New Jerusalem, but the Port Resolution folks think he is just a fake opportunist.

While I found the John Frum faith amusing at first, my amusement turned to sheepishness as I came to appreciate the simplicity and sincerity of their faith. I am in no position to say that their faith is misplaced or their practices misguided.



John Frum guitar players and singers on the floor with dancers.



John Frum cross just off village soccer field

An After School Coconut Snack

People of all ages scale coconut trees to knock down the nut. Villagers often prefer this proactive approach to waiting until the coconut decides to fall, as people at the base of the tree may not be vigilant then. These kids wielded machetes like professional copra farmers. To our knowledge, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has not yet ruled on the minimum age for scaling a coconut tree, the safety equipment required for those scaling coconut trees, or whether hard hats should be worn by people walking beneath coconut trees. But there can be little doubt what the ruling would be!





The Trip to Lenakel

We traveled for 2 hours in the back of a pickem up truck to Lenakel, the major village on the island. We stopped at the bank and bought some vatu, the coin of the realm. There was no vault; all of the day's projected cash was out on a table behind the teller. We visited a local market and met Susy, a Peace Corps volunteer from Houston. She advised that the local women who sold fruits and vegetables made about 100-200 vatu per day, which is \$1-\$2 US.



International travelers waiting at the bank to exchange money.



Susy, the Peace Corps worker who wants to re-up.



Market spreads



Luscious tomatoes and flowers

The Custom Village

On the way home we visited a "custom" village. These villagers have seen the onset on "civilization" and have rejected it in favor of their customary ways. While at first we thought that they were rejecting only the Presbyterianism, which I find understandable, we came to learn that they feel they must reject all aspects of modern society to preserve their own heritage. (Indeed, they don't have many of the fruits of modern society to reject!) They made a fire using the customary method. Try as we did, no cruiser could get the fire going using only two sticks. We didn't meet the women, but were advised that in some villages they had returned to customary dress, which is a grass skirt and bare top. The men and boys danced for us, wearing their traditional nambas, a grass penis wrap with a loop around the waist. It looked uncomfortable but its size and direction tended to flatter the male ego.



Men and boys do a traditional dance in traditional attire



Traditional fire starter; cruisers and young boys in nambas watch

Mount Yasur

The trip to the rim of Mount Yasur at dusk represented the Grande finale on the Island of Tanna. We piled into a 4WD and assaulted the jungle trail to the top of the cone. It resembled a moonscape: grey sand with lava boulders strewn around. We climbed the grey sand slope up the 400 yards up to the rim of the cone. Three large vents pushed out ominous plums of steam. About every 5

minutes one vent would rumble and belch up black smoke and blow fiery red lava boulders into the sky. Every 30 minutes or so, the other vent spewed forth white smoke and steam, but much higher than the first. As the sun set, the show grew more spectacular. Thinking that the odds of getting hit by a lava projectile exceeded those of getting struck by lightning or getting hit by a falling coconut, we decided to not mess with Mother Nature any further and took our leave back down the mountain. Once again, **High Drama** chose the conservative route.



First Class Upgrade



Elizabeth demonstrating a French field sobriety test



Mt Yasur upper right



The lakebed that no longer has water



Getting closer to the ash



The final ascent



Inside the crater



The fire in her belly

Erromango

After Tanna, we sailed north to Dillon's Bay on the island of Erromango. When Captain Cook stopped in Erromango in 1774 he offered his customary green branch of friendship. The local chief invited Cook to bring his long boat ashore. Cook suspected foul play and retreated under a burst of gunfire. According to the Lonely Planet, legends among Erromango people describe that a god had visited Erromango in a large canoe. When the islanders resisted the god, the god retreated into a floating village (Cook's ship) and it vanished into the spirit world beyond the horizon.

Peter Dillon "discovered" sandalwood on Erromango in the 1820s. Traders took this aromatic wood to China where the Chinese paid very handsomely for the wood, which they used as incense. Some ships stopped on Tanna, picked up natives and then traveled on to Erromango where they traded humans for sandalwood. The Erromangans then ate the natives from Tanna.

In modern Erromango we gave some diesel to some fishermen who returned the favor by sending another boat out to visit us. Modern Erromangan traders operated this boat. We bought some Wahoo, which was good considering that we have had very poor luck fishing lately. They asked if we wished to buy some sandalwood and we declined. Then they gave us a small piece and said, "There! Now you will remember Erromango!" It truly smells delightful.



Erromango traders

On to Port Vila

We traveled on to Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, a city of about 17,000 inhabitants. The remnants of the combined French- British rule still lingered. We spent a week in Vila waiting for the Australian High Commissioner to act on our visa application.



Port Vila



Parliament building in Vanuatu.

The structure was a gift from the Peoples' Republic of China in 1993.

In Port Vila we visited a number of fine restaurants. Ann dined on a coconut crab at one. The crab is a land crab that lives on coconut, and has quite sweet meat. The coconut crab, like the fruit bat, or as it is also known, the flying fox, are dwindling in numbers. While the conservationists among our group shunned eating this type of food, the other side of the coin is that poor islanders earn a meager amount of cash collecting and selling crabs and bats to restaurants. The villagers have so few sources of cash that the conservationists were at least forced to acknowledge the point.



Fred eating a flying fox (fruit bat). The wings and head were not served. His comment: "It's all in the sauce!"

North to Epi Island

Havannah Harbor

Havannah Harbor is a large deep-water harbor that US forces used beginning in 1942. An estimated 100,000 service personnel passed through Havannah Harbor and Port Vila en route to other ships and Marine units in the

Pacific. The harbor was also a staging area for up to 50 US Navy ships before to Battle of the Coral Sea. We are pleased to say that based on our brief tour of the area by land the only trace of the war effort are some 1942 Coke bottles that the locals sell at a roadside fruit and vegetable stand called a “WWII” museum!



Twin extinct volcanoes en route to Epi Island

Lamen Bay, Epi Island

Lamen Bay is the home of Epi High School, one of only a few in Vanuatu. We met the principal, a couple of teachers, the chief bursar, the grounds keeper, and the secretary who seemed to run things. The principal, a delightful woman, appears calmly dedicated to making small gains. Two Peace Corps volunteers help around the school. One got the school garden producing a surplus that enables a small profit from sales at the market and to yachties. We gave the school pencils and paper pads that we had been carrying for just such a purpose and were advised that we must, in turn, accept some things from the school. We were given fresh tomatoes, cabbage, and a pumpkin. It costs 30,000 vatu, or about \$230 US to go to school for each of three terms, and that doesn't include board. We don't know where the families get that much cash.

That night the village hosted a traditional dinner for the yachties. The food was excellent, and we met quite a few more yachties and land based Europeans, and some Ni-Vanuatans. We finally drank some local kava. This brew truly packs more kick than Fiji kava because it is ground up without being dried, and mixed with a very small amount of water. It tastes like the drink is prepared without removing the dirt from the root.



High school students between periods



A young woman weaving palm fronds



Island lad



Tina from Germany, visiting Lamén Bay, Vanuatu



Lamen Islander sailing dugout canoe home using palm frond sail

Banen Bay, Malakula Island

Anthropologists have been studying Malakula Island for years. It is the home of the Big Nambas, the tribe that formerly lived in the hills in the North, and the Small Nambas, the tribe that lives in the Southern coastal area. The Big Nambas, named after their penis sheaths, made war at the slightest provocation. Notwithstanding the influence of Christianity, they still believe in sorcery. Old men

can be seen who have elongated heads, a result of having rings placed on their skulls as youths.

The Small Nambas lived in the Southeast and have been not quite as fierce. They allow their women to go through a series of steps to achieve political power, similar to the steps followed by the men, but never achieving as high a status. Small Namba women who reach high steps have the privilege of having their two front teeth ceremoniously knocked out with a rock. Although some women we have seen simply lacked good dental hygiene, we have seen enough who lack the same teeth to conclude that they have been through the ceremony!

At Banen Bay we witnessed a village traditional dance by the Small Nambas, followed by a dance by the women of the village. Of course, the women were not allowed to be anywhere near the sacred place that the men danced, or even to watch.



Older warriors formed the percussion group



Younger warriors



Some liked to scare the audience



The hats are masks



The women seemed less pleased about the performance



Little ones joined in

The village was not a custom village, but rather one that had the good sense to capitalize on tourism. After the dance the warriors changed back into the common apparel of the islands: baggy basketball or soccer shorts and faded T-shirts with American logos, usually Adidas or Nike, and sometimes the Chicago Bulls or the Dallas Cowboys. Clothes that are donated charities in the US are sold in poor countries. Also, yachties trade clothes for fruits and vegetables, a practice that benefits the Ni Vanuatans. Logos of worldwide corporations seem to show up everywhere.



Note Nike logo on back of kids' dugout canoe

As we signed the village guest book, the chief invited us to a wedding the next day, three villages down. About a half hour walk, he said. Locals don't wear

watches and their estimates of time and distance lack the precision that Westerners worship. After a long hike, about an hour and a half, we attended a Presbyterian wedding. Presbyterian services, in my experience, always lasted long enough to produce a certain amount of discomfort. This pastor proved to be no exception and piped on quite a good long time.

The service, the hymns, and the prayers were in Bislama. Occasionally the pastor spoke in English, we think for our benefit. We all concluded that since he had filled the church for this ceremony he decided to take his best shot at saving some souls. We came to admire the Bigfala by the time he concluded.

Outside, when we might have thrown rice, people threw talcum powder, first all over the groom then on the bride, and then some on each guest. It was “Just for fun” according to the women who had the powder.



The Church



The wedding party; the groom with talcum powder in his hair

While we waited for the service we were served lap lap. This version was made from cassava or manioc root, grated with coconut milk. Small pieces of beef are added. It is then wrapped and cooked in leaves like banana leaves. It was quite rich but also tasty.

Kids encircled us, particularly Ann. She entertained them and they sang to her. At one point Ann recognized a song a child was singing from the opera Hansel & Gretel by E. Humperdink. When she started singing along and taught the girl some of the words and a dance step, an adult asked about the history of the song. Ann explained that it was from a German opera based on Grimm fairy tale. She explained the story that the children were lost in the woods and the witch captured them and put them into the oven to turn them into gingerbread. She felt odd explaining the tale to a group of people whose relatives practiced cannibalism less than a generation ago.



Lap lap looks like pizza



The girls clung to Ann



As we left the village, kids again ran with us, grabbed our hands, and started singing songs. After they sang, they invited us to sing to them, which we did. Shortly thereafter they stopped walking with us!

Luganville on the Island of Espiritu Santo

Now, a dozen yachts from half a dozen countries sail in and out of the Luganville Harbor each week. Freighters stop here twice a week with a few supplies. Air Vanuatu runs two flights per week. Luganville Harbor in Espiritu Santo is much quieter now. However, between 1942-1945 this harbor was the second largest United States military installation in the Pacific, ranking behind Hawaii.

In early 1942 Japanese forces moved south toward Australia and New Zealand, taking Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines, the Gilberts, and the Solomon's. After the Battle of the Coral Sea, their string of victories stopped. The United States established bases, first in New Caledonia, and then in more northern islands, the New Hebrides from which to mount a counteroffensive. The Luganville Harbor and the surrounding area housed up to 100 ships, 650 aircraft, three bomber landing fields, two fighter airfields, three dry docks, one large enough to float a battleship, four hospitals, 43 movie houses, and up to 47,000 military personnel and another 15,000 civilian personnel. More than 500,000 military personnel moved through here, mostly Americans, but also New Zealanders and Australians. Many Army, Navy, and Marine Corps troops moved saw Luganville before heading off to fight in other places in the South Pacific. Fighters and bombers from these airfields made runs back and forth to the Solomon Islands, 650 miles away. These bases provided the staging area for the

bloody battle of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, the first US landing on Japanese held territory in WWII.

The jungle has not claimed as much of the remnants of war as planners hoped. Concrete buildings still stand and Luganville has wide paved streets, crowned with good drainage. Earthen ammunition bunkers outside of Luganville support green tropical plants and are now used to store copra. But there is a quiet feeling, almost a ghost town feeling in Luganville

War Memorial Tourist attractions: Diving on Million Dollar Point and the *SS President Coolidge*

At war's end the United States military had a problem: what to do with the massive amount of surplus stores and equipment in the area. Although the information that we have is far from clear, the military apparently negotiated with the French plantation owners and with the New Hebrides government. Deadlines came and passed and the prospective buyers believed the Americans would leave the equipment in any event, so they declined to buy it at 8 cents on the dollar. To the surprise of many, one day and for many days Americans drove tanks, jeeps, trucks, cranes, and other rolling stock and materials into the sea. The area today is referred to as Million Dollar Point, although at one time its value clearly exceeded that. Now the sea off the point provides divers and snorkelers with entertainment as they try to determine whether General Motors or Chrysler made a certain truck or tank, and to watch as the sea slowly reclaims the metal.



The beach at Million Dollar Point at low tide

The SS *President Coolidge*

We also dove on the wreck of the **SS *President Coolidge***. This 650 foot long 21,000-ton luxury liner spent the decade of the Thirties in service carrying passengers and cargo for the American President Lines (APL) between San Francisco and ports in the Far East. When the war came she was quickly converted to a troopship. In October of 1942 she left San Francisco with 4800 Army Infantry troops destined to relieve the battle weary First Marine Division at Guadalcanal. The ship also carried an enormous amount of military ordnance, and much needed medical supplies, including 519 pounds of quinine, the reserve supply of the entire South Pacific area. (Malaria ran rampant in the New Hebrides then and now and also in the Solomon's.)

When she arrived in Luganville, New Hebrides, the **SS President Coolidge** steamed right into a minefield laid by the Navy weeks earlier. She hit two mines and sustained massive holes. Surmising that the vessel would very soon sink, the Captain tried to run her aground. He partially succeeded and hit a reef. The crew and troops abandoned ship in less than two hours. Out of over 5,000 men, all but two escaped. The big liner heaved to port and sunk, her bow in 70 feet of water and her stern hung out in 240 feet of water.

The Navy court-martialed the Captain for disregarding instructions about how to enter the harbor without crossing the minefield. The Captain and all of his officers denied receiving instructions about the safe entry to the harbor. At the time, the **President Coolidge** was under a bareboat charter controlled by the War Shipping Administration. She was a merchant marine vessel with a civilian merchant marine crew. She was not a military vessel nor was she under the control of the Navy. Ultimately the Navy acquitted the Captain, obviously resolving the issue of whether he received information that the harbor was mined in his favor.

The ship now rates as the second largest accessible ship for recreational scuba divers in the world. M-1 rifles, helmets, canteens, and artillery shells are strewn around the promenade deck. The ship gives one quite an eerie feeling. She lays silently, her metal slowly yielding to the sea. Her sailing days were full of glory; her sinking was the result of an egregious error. Today, however, the **President Coolidge** provides Vanuatu with one of its top tourist attractions.



The **President Coolidge** as a luxury liner



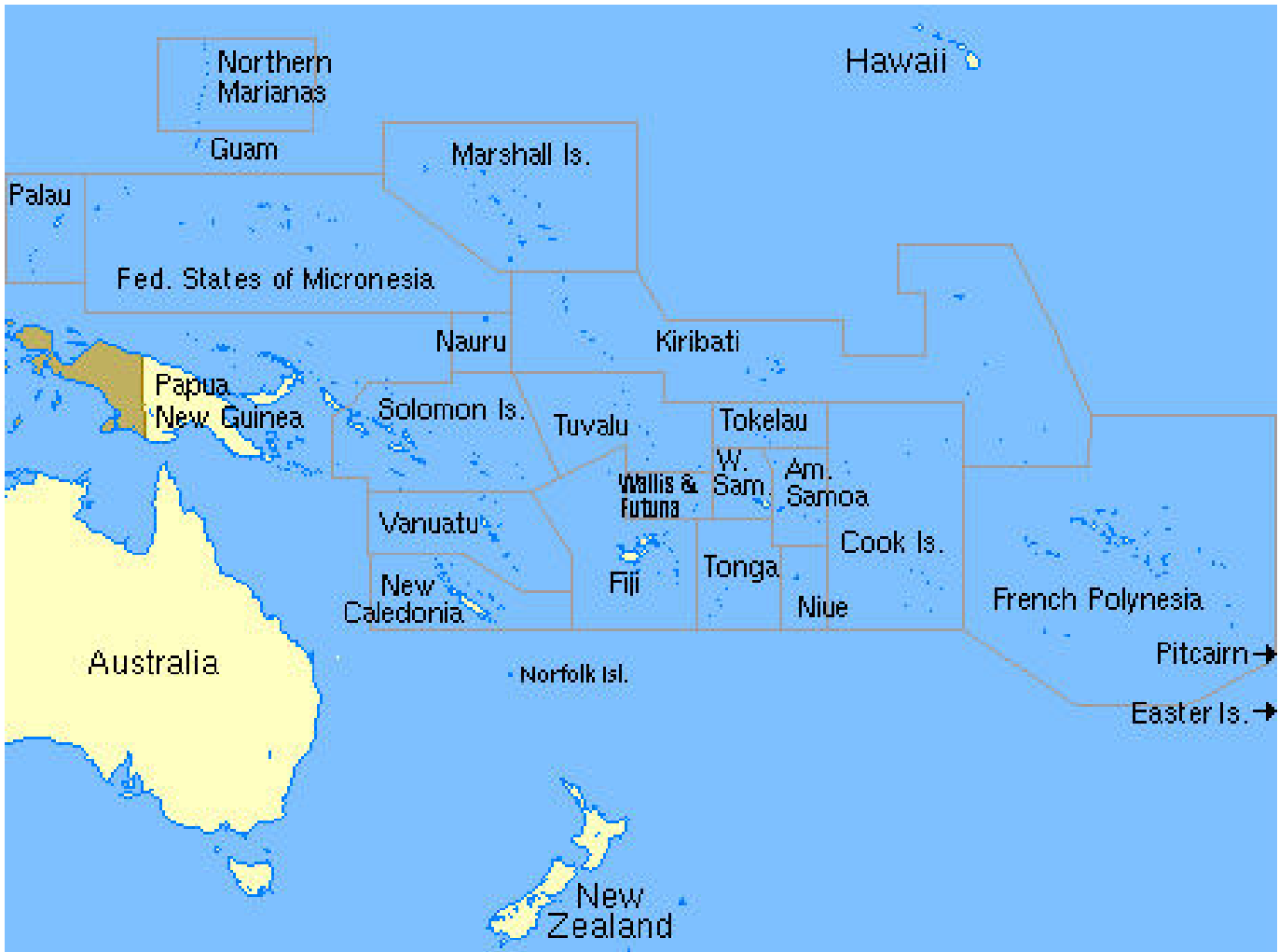
The *President Coolidge* as she slowly began to roll to port.

Farwell Vanuatu!

Vanuatu stands as one of the most fascinating places we have visited but we must move on. As we indicated in our last log, we are heading to Brisbane, Australia by mid-November when the cyclone season starts in the tropics. By the time that you read this, we will be sailing for New Caledonia about 375 miles to the Southwest.

Thanks for your visit to our website! Be sure and send us an email!

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Fini