



SOLEMN REMINDER: The final resting place of a Grumman Wildcat at the Vilu War museum.

PHOTOS / RICHARD MOORE

Ghosts of WWII preserved

Downed aircraft vivid reminders of the war fought in the Pacific, writes **Richard Moore**

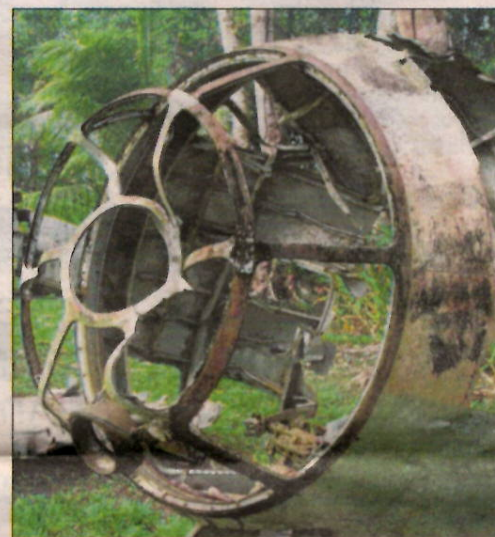
AN astounding labour of love sits about 50km west of Honiara, hidden behind a deceptively plain-looking building. A sign tells you that it is the Vilu War Museum, but it looks very small to contain much in the way of World War II treasures.

At a clearly pre-arranged signal — the toot of our car horn — a white-haired Solomon Islander emerges from the surrounding green vegetation to let us in.

He is the curator and owner of the museum, Anderson Diua, and it was his uncle, Fred Kona, who created the place we are about to visit.

Inside the concrete block and tin-roofed building are World War II photos lining the rough walls. Anderson talks about the war and details of the pictures before leading us outside to what proves to be the real museum. Immediately you know you have stumbled upon something special in this out-of-the-way spot. It is an amazing collection of war relics that would make a large-city museum proud — if they could fit them in.

Instantly, a rusting Japanese 150mm artillery piece grabs your eye, then you notice the two other heavy guns that have



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Memorial to the HMAS Canberra at Vilu. An aircraft propeller sits outside the Vilu War Museum on Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. The nose cone of a Japanese Betty bomber at Vilu. Japanese heavy artillery at the Vilu War Museum.

been brought from the jungle to rest at Vilu. They all sit neatly in a line on the well-looked-after lawn amid pretty gardens and tall trees.

Nearby, the turret of an Allied tank lies forlornly wanting attention, but that is instead grabbed by the nose cone of a Japanese bomber known as a Betty.

More aircraft remains sit in the peaceful garden, urging you on towards a burned Grumman Wildcat with a badly mangled propeller. It clearly had a bad end to its last flight and, with luck, the pilot survived.

With a cheeky look, Anderson tells us to ready our cameras and he removes a long metal pin from the wing. Then he moves back towards the tail of the aircraft, swinging the wing backwards and revealing the plane to be a carrier-based fighter that could be folded up to fit better below the warship's flight deck.

Then Anderson shows us the early-war US military symbol of a white star with a red circle in the centre.

There are many other great finds at Vilu War Museum, including a long-barrelled anti-tank gun, and the radial engine from a Zero — the famed Japanese fighter that created havoc for Allied pilots.

I recognised a piece of one aircraft that took me straight back to my childhood and building model planes.

It was the front landing gear of a US fighter — a Lockheed P-38 Lightning to be precise. The shape of the pilot's cockpit was unmistakable and was a sad end to one of the Allies' most feared weapons.

Another easily recognisable form was the remains of a Vought F4U Corsair, better known to the Japanese as the Whistling Death because of its distinctive engine noise.

It was hard to miss the Corsair's



W-shaped wings and, having seen the fighter fly at air shows in New Zealand, it was a reminder of the violence of war and what happens to a beautiful flying machine when it hits the ground.

Standing quietly poignant in the museum grounds are memorials to the fallen servicemen of both sides. They are in their own small place of peace amid the remains of war.

The journey to Vilu War Museum from Honiara takes about an hour and visitors with an interest in military history should write it down as a must-visit attraction.

■ *Richard Moore visited the Vilu War Museum courtesy of the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau.*

WAR STORIES: Battlefield guide Michael Ramosaea.



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