

# TALES OF THE South Pacific



James A. Michener



# Some Enchanted Island

## JAMES MICHENER'S ESPIRITU SANTO

Story by Donna Esposito. Photography courtesy of the South Pacific WWII Museum.

For the past two centuries, the islands of the Pacific have captured writers' imaginations and no author is more synonymous with the South Pacific than James A. Michener. His 1947 novel *Tales of the South Pacific* won the Pulitzer Prize and was later adapted into the beloved Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, first on Broadway and then on film. In the seventy years since Michener first published *Tales*, millions of readers and theatre-goers have vicariously visited its exotic setting: Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and New Caledonia during the turmoil of World War II. Michener came to know this setting intimately while based on the island of Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides.

Born in 1907, Michener grew up near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Despite his advanced age of thirty-five and Quaker religious beliefs, which exempted him from military service, Michener wanted to support the Allied cause and enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1942. He received a commission as a lieutenant in 1943 and was sent to Washington, D.C. as a publications editor for the Bureau of Aeronautics. Although this fitted well with his background as a textbook editor, Michener longed for excitement and petitioned for overseas duty. In April 1944 he received his wish and boarded a battered troop transport bound for the South Pacific. His destination was the bustling U.S. base on Espiritu Santo.

In 1942, men and equipment had poured into Santo to create a massive rear area base to support the fighting further north in the Solomons, with multiple airfields, a seaplane base, port, dry dock, hospitals, and recreation facilities. Lt. Michener, one of 500,000 servicemen to be stationed on Espiritu Santo during the war, spent his first night there aboard

his troopship, anchored near a dock that served the copra plantation of a Frenchman named Aubert Ratard. M. Ratard, his Tonkinese laborers, and the alluring island of Aoba (also known as Ambae), visible in the distance, would come to have a profound impact on Michener.

Michener was housed in a Quonset hut, and given a jeep, typewriter, two corporals to serve as couriers, and authorization for transportation between islands. Serving as "a kind of superclerk for the naval air forces" who would "visit all the Navy air units to be sure they have the necessary manuals for the operation and maintenance of our airplanes," Michener's duties gave him a great deal of freedom. For the next eight months he traveled to various islands to deliver messages, inspect ground installations, and replenish supplies. Arriving after the fighting was over, his visits were 'like going to a Sunday picnic.' However, this assignment was not without risks. Michener visited forty-nine islands and traveled 150,000 miles, which meant many takeoffs and landings in every sort of aircraft. One treacherous landing on New Caledonia prompted the shaken Michener to resolve, "I'm going to live the rest of my life as if I were a great man. I will constantly support the things I believe in."

An assignment to reward 'natives' who had rescued downed American pilots, took Michener across the water from Santo to the mist-covered volcanic island of Aoba. First greeted by seventy Melanesian girls between the ages of ten and eighteen, he then met Mother Margaret who had run a school on Tulagi in the Solomons before she and her students were forced to flee from the invading Japanese. When Michener asked who had saved the American aviators, Mother Margaret pointed to a young girl and said, "There's your man! Yes, that girl

saved the Americans. When their planes went down offshore, she paddled out and dragged them into her canoe." Michener rewarded the young heroine, and also arranged for his peacetime employer, Macmillan Publishing, to send Mother Margaret's school more than two hundred textbooks.

Between his visits to other islands, Michener made himself at home on Espiritu Santo. The "island was my oyster. I knew every corner of it. I knew all the chicanery. I knew who was brewing home brew and who was stealing alcohol from the torpedo base. I really was a sort of a gossip." He became friends with plantation owner Aubert Ratard and his family. Fascinated by the diversity of cultures on the island, he also came to know the Tonkinese indentured servants who worked on the copra plantation. Their indentures had expired, but they could not return home to Vietnam because of the war. One of Ratard's best workers, a woman who was "outspoken in her advocacy of Tonkinese rights," explained the situation to Michener. He had "never learned her real name, but because of her strong resistance to exploitation, she had come to be known as Bloody Mary."

In addition to Ratard's, Michener's favorite plantation was owned by Madame Gardel, "a wonderful French dynamo," who would "smuggle in eight or ten very attractive French girls, many of them half Polynesian, half Tonkinese," to sing and dance with the American boys. Michener thought Mme. Gardel's was "the finest plantation in the New Hebrides," and it became his "club away from home."

Michener found he also had free time to read and study on Santo. He formed an officers' discussion group that met weekly to share ideas. One night, shortly after the close call on New Caledonia, one of the officers asked what Michener





had been studying. He realized it had been “exactly nothing.” Remembering his resolution to live as a great man, Michener returned to his quarters that night and began writing his first novel, *Tales of the South Pacific*.

From the late fall of 1944 to the spring of 1945, Michener, working in the solitude of a cacao plantation, drafted outlines of his stories by day. Each night at seven o’clock, he watched a movie on the base. Afterward, he went back to the plantation, armed with mosquito bombs and a stack of photographs to help him describe people and places. Sitting at a desk in the corner of an empty warehouse, he typed his stories by lamplight using just his index fingers until two o’clock each morning.

Michener’s island hopping allowed him to meet aviators, sailors, Seabees, doctors, nurses, and marines. He had absorbed their stories at dinner parties,

officers’ clubs, or on missions. Now, he crafted them into a novel, a collection of eighteen interwoven stories written with the “aim of refreshing the wartime memories of my colleagues in years ahead to record the reality of World War II, and for the young men and women who had lived it.” As he told an editor at the *Saturday Evening Post*, “nothing in the manuscript is entirely fictitious.” M. Ratard and other French planters became the model for Emile de Becque who falls in love with Navy nurse Nellie Forbush. De Becque’s octagon-shaped house was perhaps inspired by a similar one owned by planter Jean My, which still stands on Santo today. The mysterious Aoba, with its young girls sequestered away from the thousands of men on Santo, became the basis for Bali Ha’i. Tonkinese laborer Bloody Mary retained her name, and Michener gave her the feisty personality of Samoan hotel owner Aggie Grey.

When Michener’s tour of duty ended, he received an offer he couldn’t refuse: to stay as a naval historian to write the official history of the war in the Pacific. Coincidentally, this is the job he had given to the fictional narrator of *Tales*. Michener was promoted to Lieutenant Commander and finally returned to the U.S. in December of 1945. *Tales* was published in 1947 and adapted for Broadway in 1949. Through *Tales*, Michener achieved his goal of recording the reality of the Pacific war and also fulfilled his resolution to support the ideals in which he believed. A central theme of *Tales* is racial equality and the condemnation of prejudice as a learned trait, not a natural condition. Ahead of its time in the 1940s, its message is still relevant today. Michener returned to Santo in 1985 for



the television program 60 Minutes. He was moved to tears as he saw the ruins of M. Ratard's plantation home where he had experienced so many enchanted evenings. However, the dilapidated tin shacks used by the Tonkinese laborers still stood. Unbelievably, Mme. Gardel was still alive at age ninety-five, her plantation gone and living on the edge of the jungle. Michener refused to return to Aoba; he wanted Bali Ha'i to "remain a place in his imagination, a private dream."

**W**hen the war ended, the vast quantities of equipment on Espiritu Santo were not needed. Instead of shipping the surplus back to the U.S., the Americans dumped the material into Segond Channel. Still a major attraction today, divers can see everything from jeeps and bulldozers to Coke bottles. The site is known as Million Dollar Point for the massive amount of waste there, but perhaps the most valuable items somewhere at the bottom of Segond Channel are the desk and typewriter Michener used to create *Tales of the South Pacific*.

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She is a member of the South Pacific WWII Museum, supporting this new development on Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu. To find out more about the South Pacific World War II Museum, visit [southpacificwwiimuseum.com](http://southpacificwwiimuseum.com).

