

Innocence and Danger: Growing Up Among Unexploded Ordnance

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I grew up on Nila Island in Shortlands Western Province, Solomon Islands. We did not have much, and our family depended on my parents' basic income and subsistence farming for survival. My sister and I never owned a Barbie doll or any toys to play with; we were outdoor children. Not having any toys to play with was never an issue because we had a lot of other things to play with and enjoy, such as swimming in the sea and running wild in the bush and paddock.

There were many World War II remnants: The dark room in the heart of the Nila Catholic Mission, which was believed to be a torture room for war prisoners; the machine guns that drove our imagination wild;

bunkers and manmade caves that motivated us to explore; and the wreckage of warships and warplanes underwater and on land that sometimes scared me. The countless unexploded ordnances all over the islands prevent us from practicing slash and burn farming techniques and other cultural rituals, traditions, or activities that require fire. For example, the traditional way of cooking fish known as "ugaha iana" involves a frame constructed over an open fire. The fish are placed on the frame and a fire is lit beneath it, ensuring that the flames remain minimal. This process can take several days or even weeks, during which the fish are cooked by smoke and preserved.



Figure 1. Plane smashed by fallen tree, Nila Village. Photograph courtesy of Tobias Sandakabatu, Solomon Islands Tourism Division (www.facebook.com/DivisionTourism).

My favorite remnants were the two Japanese fighter planes next to our house. My sister and I would pretend to be pilots on these two warplanes as we spent long hours imitating what we had seen in the movies. We were never told about the consequences of playing with unexploded ordnances and how deadly they can be: one explosion of a bomb would kill a whole village. We were innocent children just playing and our parents and elders of the village had limited knowledge of the risks.

Now that I am a grown woman, whenever I fly Solomon Airlines, or sit in a luxury resort lobby and glance through the magazines, as I flip through the pages from the Solomon Islands' pristine beaches to virgin forests, from stunning waterfalls to infectious smiles, my heart feels elated. Yet as I eagerly flip through the pages, whenever I reach articles sharing historic World War II legends with pictures of relics, remnants, or wreckages, I freeze with a shiver down my spine remembering those innocent lives who have passed on from accidents caused by World War II unexploded ordnances (Espiner 2021). These unexploded ordnances are buried beneath our homes, graveyards, playing grounds, infrastructure, under the ocean, and even in our school compounds. Most recently, in August 2024, World War II bombs were discovered at St. Nicholas School compound (Iroga 2024).

Guadalcanal Province, where the capital of the Solomon Islands, Honiara, is located, along with the central and western parts of the Solomon Islands, are deadly minefields. And sadly, people are living their life like there are no consequences under their footsteps. The limited awareness and work in addressing this elephant in the room is

concerning, especially amidst increasing climate change, sea-level rise, random flash floods, and landslides that may dig up these deadly objects to the surface. Take, for example, the unexploded ordnance discovered by my eight-year-old daughter beside our outdoor kitchen at Bloody Ridge, in the outskirts of Honiara. After an unexpected downpour that caused soil erosion, an unidentified metallic object appeared in the ground. We were curious and tried to identify what it was, but as we tried to dig it out of the ground, halfway through, we realized that it was a bomb. We rushed and called the bomb squad from the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force. It took a while for them to arrive, and it was an agonizing wait. Even after they had removed the bomb and promised to return to scan the whole area for unexplored ordnance, the anxiety remained.

The battle in the Solomon Islands during World War II occurred 82 years ago. It is now part of history, a chapter that has closed, and we have moved on. The relics, remnants, and wreckage of this legend of World War II have now become a beacon of hope for local people to earn income through tourism. It is widely advertised as a tourist attraction. Yet, behind that attraction lies an unattractive risk. That risk is not obvious to the naked eye, but it is apparent to the families and friends of the victims of accidental explosions. Not only them, but also a few leaders and others who are aware of the history and the consequences that come with it. Unfortunately, there is limited discourse on addressing the consequences.

History tells us that the Second World War fight in the Solomon Islands lasted for only six months. Yet, the effort to clean up the

remnants is taking forever. There were discussions among Pacific Islands leaders and donors from bilateral partners including the United States, Norway, and Australia (Kekea 2021), yet the need remains, as does the fear in the people. As Gina Kekea stated, “Locals should not be forced to live in fear of the hidden menace still posed by explosive wartime remnants” (Kekea 2021).

As a daughter of the Solomon Islands, it is frustrating to think about why my country was chosen as the battlefield in the Pacific where the fiercest battle was fought. I do not know why, and sometimes I wonder if my people were given a choice—and if they were, whether the story would be different today. Or maybe it is what it is. Whose responsibility is it to clean up after the war?



Figure 2. Aichi E13A1 Seaplane with pontoons. Photograph courtesy of Tobias Sandakabatu, Solomon Islands Tourism Division (www.facebook.com/DivisionTourism).

Is it the combatants during World War II? Is it the Pacific Islands Forum members, or our Pacific family? Is it the Solomon Islands, now a sovereign state? I do not know, but I am sure this calls for greater collaboration. Should we live in the past? I do not know, but I am sure if it affected us yesterday and will affect us tomorrow, then it is a conversation we need to have today. May the souls of the fallen soldiers’ rest in eternal peace upon our land, and may we unite to shield the innocent lives from the danger of unexploded ordnances that lie hidden in our scared soil. And let this hallowed ground be the canvas where we begin to weave our stories, honor our past, and address the threat of unexploded ordnances today for a safer tomorrow.

References

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