

# HERITAGE WRECKS

: PIERRE LARUE



One of four B17E engines  
in Koumac Lagoon.  
(Luc Faucompré)



> WHEN HE LANDED AT NOUMÉA IN 1975, RAYMOND PRONER REALISED THAT FEW PEOPLE IN NEW CALEDONIA WERE AWARE OF THE HISTORY OF MANY WRECKS, SOME OF THEM EMERGING FROM THE IMMENSE REEF ENCIRCLING THE MAIN ISLAND. HE BROUGHT TOGETHER THE TALENTS AND KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER PASSIONATE PEOPLE AND FOUNDED 'FORTUNES DE MER CALÉDONIENNES' (FMC) TO UNDERTAKE THE INVENTORY OF THE COUNTRY'S MARITIME HERITAGE.

In December 1831 the schooner *Madeira Packet* foundered on Bampton Reefs to the north of the Chesterfield Archipelago. It was the first of a long list of known shipwrecks in New Caledonia, the great majority of which took place on the Great Barrier Reef. The mechanical and permanent action of the breaking waves destroyed and dispersed any unfortunate vessels. Crews of the schooners, three-masts, and later the large ore-carrying sailing ships, paid dearly during this maritime history.

The main tragedy of the time was that of the three-mast *Grimenza*, which was transporting Asian workers. In 1850 it foundered on one of the Bampton Reefs and its 650 passengers died from exhaustion. More recently, the mysterious disappearance of the MS *La Monique* during the night of 31 July 1953 with 126 victims between Maré and the Main Island, remains a sensitive and painful

story in Caledonian memory. FMC is currently searching for this ship.

## DISCOVERING A WRECK

As in the case of a police enquiry, if collected information seems serious and provides the possibility of 'the target' being accessible, action is taken. In the case of a potential wreck discovery, if, given the means of detection available, the probable estimated depth, and the geographical distance from the wreck site, exploration seems viable, then everything is put into place to try to find the wreck.

The search begins on land. Old local newspapers published since 1859 are carefully scoured, as well as minutes from maritime proceedings, Lloyd's register, plus local, national and private archives in Paris, the provinces and even overseas. Today, FMC has exceptional archives on the history of more than 270 shipwrecks

from 1831 to present day, allowing the formal identification of 56 of these.

On 21 September 1984 the association discovered its first ship: the English clipper *Maitland* wrecked in 1874 on Fabre Islet at Entrecasteaux Reefs. The most difficult research involved the four-mast *Emile Renouf* which disappeared in 1900 with a cargo of 3,388 tonnes of nickel and 176 tonnes of cobalt in sacks. It was discovered in 1989 on the fourth attempt. It was lying six metres down on the edge of Durand Reef, a veritable 'pin head' in the middle of the sea to the south-east of Maré.

The most emotional find was the wreck of an American fighter bomber type P39, the *Airacobra*, discovered by chance during shallow water submarine work in August 1994. When drawing up accumulated sediments from the bottom of the cockpit, divers found the remains of



< Three-mast  
barque *Armen*  
wreck near Uatio  
Pass since 1909.  
(Luc Faucompré).

Maéva Fried, the  
youngest FMC  
member, near  
one of the 22  
guns of the *La  
Seine* corvette,  
wrecked since  
1846 in Pouebo  
Pass.

# FORTUNES DE MER CALEDONIENNES



▲ Ever Prosperity beached near Isié Pass in 1965. A ship by the same name is beached on Abore Reef.

The anchor of the Cher, a French Navy sailing steamer, on the Contrariété Reef.

Botany Island.

Recovery of an old whaler pot, forgotten since 1850 by whalers on Ile Longue - Chesterfield.



▲ Kouakoué camp, the traditional briefing after having worked on the Ville de Saint-Nazaire's wreck.

September 1991: Fortunes de Mer Calédoniennes's founding members, discovered the four-mast barque Emile Renouf, wrecked on Durand Reef since 1900.

> One of two giant anchors of the five-mast barque France II discovered in April 1987. (Luc Faucompré)

the pilot and his equipment. Howard W. Hubert, aged 22, missing in action, was identified by American authorities (CIL Hawaii).

The three-mast *Tacite* represents the most interesting archaeological deposit for its size and the quality of preservation. This wreck was discovered in 1998, and had rested at a depth of 30 metres in the Mato Pass since 1873. The discovery of the steel three-mast *Ville de St Nazaire* in 2006 is the association's most recent. Shipwrecked in 1904, this one-tanker broke in two pieces and lays at 40 metres in the limpid waters of the Kouakoué Pass.

So far FMC has located 23 wrecks; all have been declared to the Maritime Authorities. After being meticulously inventoried, the remains are given for safe keeping to qualified people at the New Caledonian Maritime History



Museum (MHMNC) in Nouméa. There they immediately undergo treatment for preservation, are restored and stocked with a view to their future exhibition to the public.

### A MUSEUM OF HISTORY

Created in 1999, on the initiative of the Salomon and Fortunes de Mer Calédoniennes associations, the MHMNC is a community structure. Dedicated to the maritime history of the Caledonian Archipelago and to one of the main 18th century maritime expeditions in the Pacific, it presents seven themes in chronological order from the arrival of the first oceanian sailors to the Pacific War.

The archipelago's modern maritime history began in 1774, when the famous Captain James Cook aboard the HMS *Resolution*, landed in the northeast of the Main Island. *La Pérouse* followed him before tragically disappearing at

Vanikoro (Solomon Islands). Visitors will appreciate part of the extraordinary collection of objects recovered from the wrecks of *l'Astrolabe* and *La Boussole* during the eight expéditions organised by the Salomon Association.

At the beginning of the 19th century, whaling ships were the first sailing in the South Pacific. In 1842, discovery of precious sandalwood at the Isle of Pines and Loyalty Island brought the first 'trading' relations with local indigenous populations. Remains of the wreck of the corvette *La Seine* which sank in Pouébo Pass in 1846, illustrate the pre-colonial period.

In 1853, after claiming New Caledonia in the name of Emperor Napoleon III, Tardy de Montravel chose the bays at Noumea to develop the new colony's main centre. Penal transportation began in 1864; it is illustrated in the museum by a very realistic cell on a 'cage ship'. The absence of roads on the main island necessitated a coastal service using small steamships, with steamers supplying the Loyalty Islands. The exhibition of objects found on the wreck of the *Tacite* (1872),

the *John Higginson* (1882) and the *Ambroua* (1888) demonstrate the realities of daily life in those times.

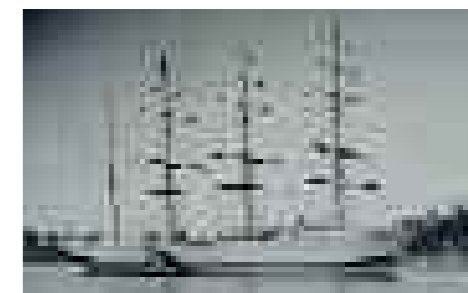
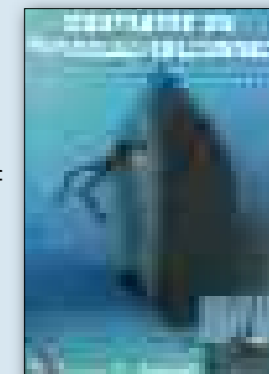
From 1874 many large sailing ships left Europe for New Caledonia, travelling non-stop via the Cape of Good Hope, making use of fair winds from southern latitudes. They loaded up with cobalt, chrome and especially nickel, then returned via Cape Horn. This circumnavigation lasted about six months. To captains of these ocean-going ships, the New Caledonian destination was known as 'the large sailing ships' graveyard'.

By extraordinary coincidence, two of the largest sailing ships ever built rest in the Main Island's lagoon. The first, a 106 metre wooden four-mast, *Roanoke*, was launched on 22 August 1892 from Bath, Maine, USA. It sank at its mooring in Néhoué Bay following a fire, with its whole cargo of chrome, on 9 August 1905. The second, the mythical 142 metre iron five-mast *France II* was launched at Bordeaux, France on 9 November 1911. It rounded Cape Horn 10 times before foundering on 7

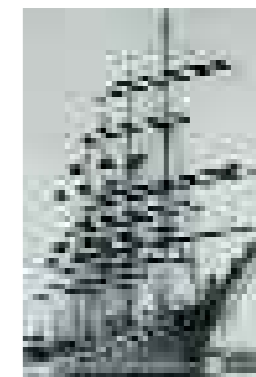


### Shipwrecks in New Caledonia (Naufrages en Nouvelle-Calédonie)

With this FMC book, you will discover the modern maritime history of New Caledonia as told from the wrecks of war ships, trading sailing ships, coastal navigation ships, sailing ore-carriers, modern crafts from the war in the Pacific and intentionally sunk ships for tourist diving. Two lists of wrecks, one in chronological order, the other in alphabetical order, complete the work.



▲ The Roanoke. (Maine Maritime Museum)

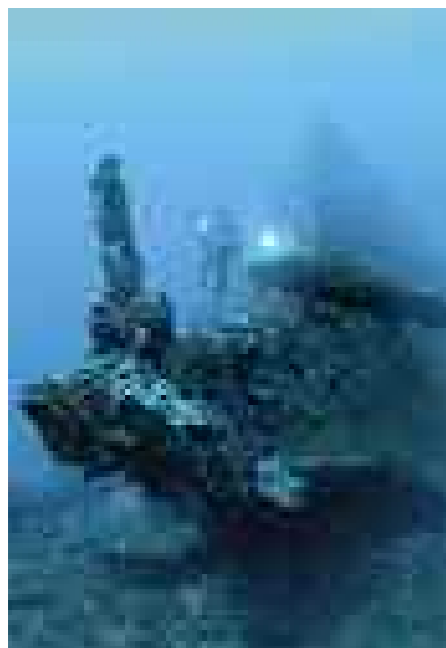


< The France II. (Coll.Part.D.R.)

### Diving on New Caledonian's wrecks

Noumea is an important place for underwater diving, with five intentionally sunk ships: *La Dieppoise*, *Humbolt*, *Caledonie Toho II*, *Calédonie Toho V*, and *Corail*. The following dive centres will take you to these sites:

- Amédée Diving Club  
Tel: (687) 26 40 29  
email: amedee@canl.nc  
website: www.amedee.sponline.com
- Lagoon Safaris  
Tel: (687) 24 18 04  
email: lagoon.safaris@lagoon.nc  
website: www.lagoon-safaris.nc



< FDM members control the hydraulic pump, over the Tacite wreck site.

François Gastine with the first artefacts of the Tacite wreck, October 2 1998.

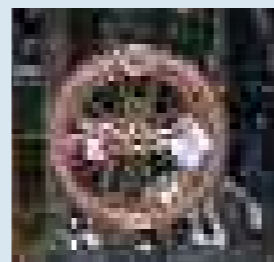
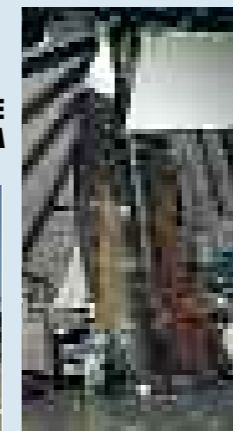
Jean-Michel Boré our video diver, making a film near the three-square mast Ville de Saint-Nazaire's head.

December 1922 on the outside of Teremba Reef. Its disappearance sounded the knell for the era of 'Nickel Route' Large Sailing Ships.

The immense restored rudder blade from the *Roanoke*, exhibited in a vertical position at the centre of the museum, shows the huge size of the sailing ore-carriers. Not to be missed either, is the helm wheel from the three-mast *Haudaudine* (wrecked in 1905 outside the Contrariété Reef), which has been remarkably put back together by pupils from Petro Attiti Professional High School.

On 12 March 1942 American forces, at war with Japan, landed at Nouméa. The allies used Main Island as a true aircraft carrier until the end of the conflict. In a C47 the visitor will have the sensation of flying over the Nouméa Harbours, used as moorages for the maintenance of the largest naval units.

## NEW CALEDONIAN MARITIME HISTORY MUSEUM



The Maritime History Museum of New Caledonia, Noumea.

The rudder blade of the barque four-mast *Roanoke*, burnt in 1905.

The restored *Haudaudine* helm.

[www.nouvellecaledonietourisme-sud.com](http://www.nouvellecaledonietourisme-sud.com)

### Howard W. Hubert, 22, MIA

On 28 November 1942, during dive-bombing training onto the wreck of the steamer *St Antoine* (wrecked on Teremba Reef in 1928) the young lieutenant pierced the surface of the lagoon at full speed. A national funeral was organised for his remains at Arlington Military Cemetery in Washington in the presence of his family. This discovery gave rise to a film on the American presence in the Pacific War being made. ■