

MISSING:

Explorer's disappearance creates a 200-year-old puzzle

In 1788, while in Botany Bay, the French explorer Jean-François de La Pérouse gave letters and a journal to Captain Arthur Phillip for forwarding to France – the last contact he was to have with his homeland. He resumed his voyage not long afterwards and was never seen again.

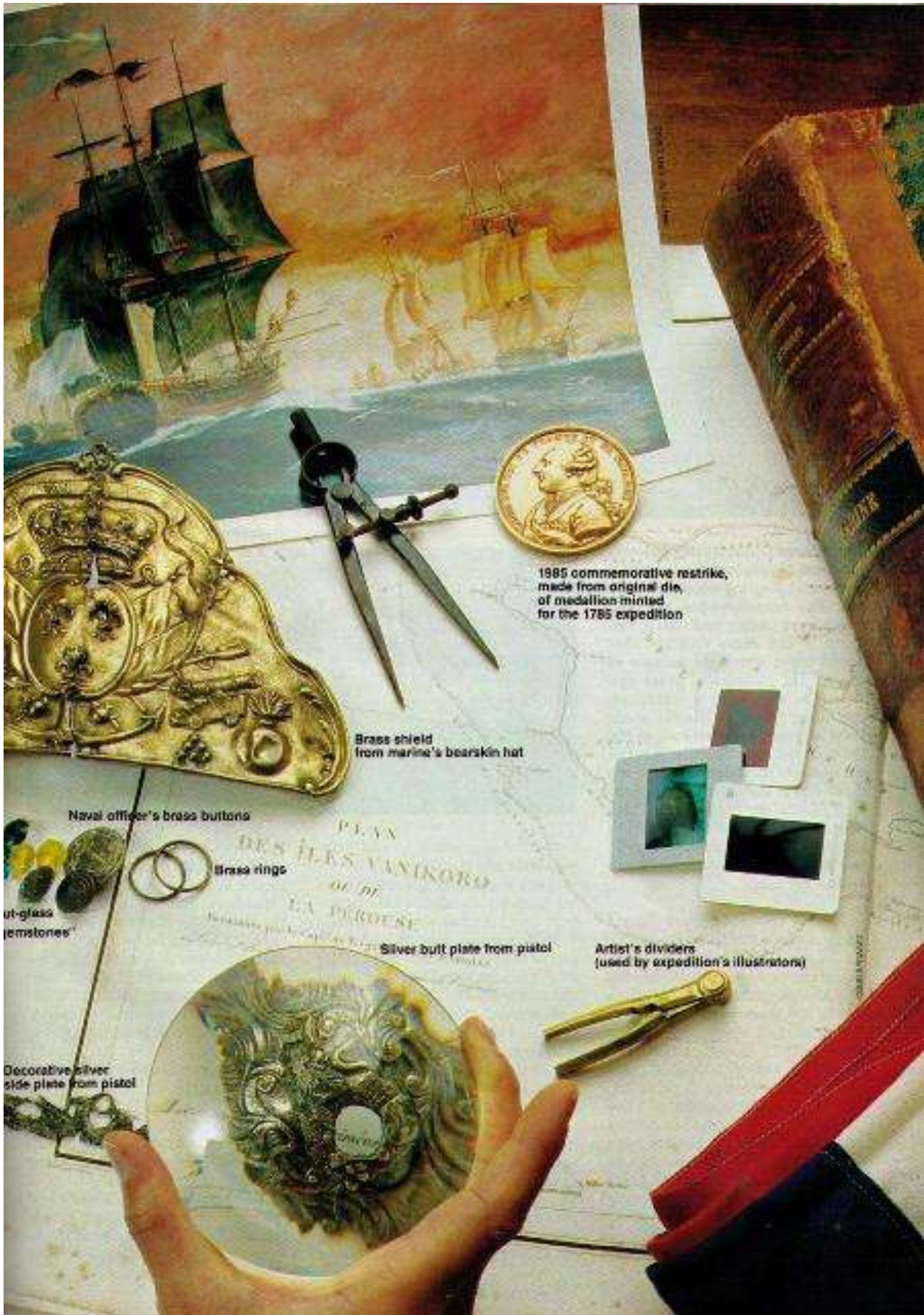


MAISON DE LA PÉROUSE

Although the fate of the La Pérouse expedition has been known since 1827, the details have been sketchy and it wasn't until 1986 that a methodical and scientific study was carried out on the wrecks of his two ships.

The study was led by Ron Coleman, maritime historian and archaeologist with the Queensland Museum, who investigated the wreck of the Pandora off north-eastern Australia. Ron's expedition recovered a treasure-trove of relics and came a step nearer to providing a complete picture of a drama that has lost none of its impact in nearly 200 years.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY RON COLEMAN



1985 commemorative restrike, made from original die, of medallion minted for the 1785 expedition

Brass shield from marine's bearskin hat

Naval officer's brass buttons

Brass rings

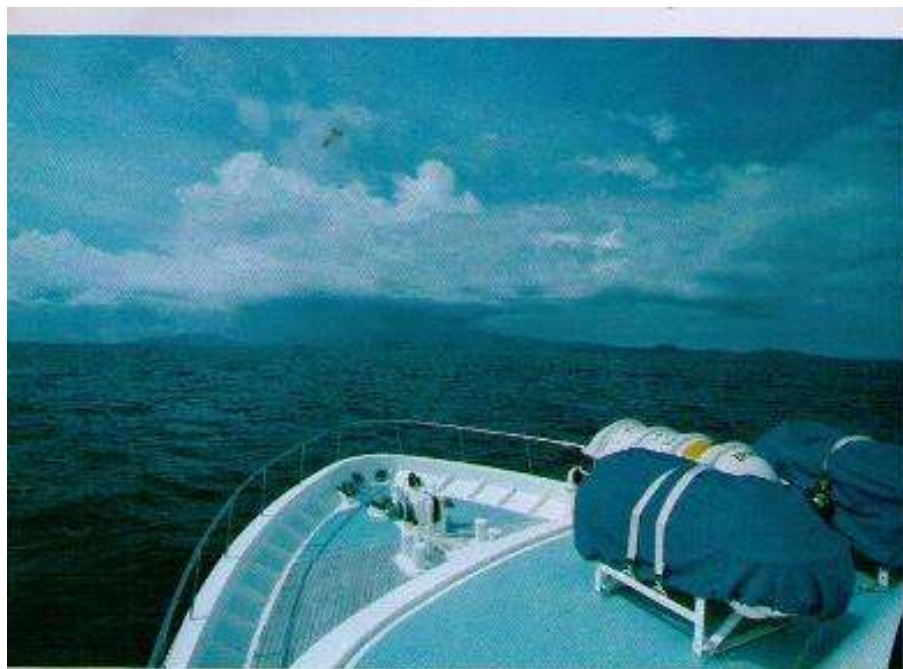
cut-glass gemstones

Silver butt plate from pistol

Artist's dividers (used by expedition's illustrators)

Decorative silver side plate from pistol

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A tropical storm dumps its burden of rain on Vanikoro, one of the Solomon Islands, as the Mantaray approaches at the start of the joint Australian, Solomons, French and New Caledonian expedition to the La Pérouse wrecks.

The steamy tropical island slowly appeared through the mist like a lost world floating on a gossamer sea. The rain-shrouded volcanic peaks were craggy and sharp, evidence of the angry violence that thrust them above the surface of the Pacific millions of years ago. We were approaching Vanikoro, one of the Solomon Islands, some 1900 kilometres north-east of the Queensland coast. Vanikoro is the site of one of the most intriguing sea mysteries of the 18th century. Our joint Australian, Solomons, French and New Caledonian expedition had come to this remote part of the South Pacific to try to unravel some of that mystery.

AS our vessel *Mantaray* slipped towards the island's barrier reef, I couldn't help picturing this same view through the eyes of 230 desperate French sailors nearly 200 years before. Caught in the night-time violence of a fierce cyclone, their two ships had been driven towards the deadly coral bastion around this forbidding, uncharted volcanic outcrop. They were half a world from their homes and thousands of kilometres from the nearest European settlement, in Australia. Their only security was the timber beneath their feet. If they survived shipwreck they would surely die on the island before anyone found them. After all they had



The French diving team's vessel, California, anchored in the calm lagoon opposite the village of Peu on Vanikoro's coast. Expedition members were happy to live aboard their boats as the island harbours some of the more virulent strains of malaria.

been through, was it to end here, violently and ignobly?

It was the stuff of adventure stories from my childhood. My heartbeat quickened as we approached.

Mantaray nosed through a narrow gap in the reef and dropped anchor in a quiet lagoon. There we found the motor-vessel *California*, which had arrived from Noumea with several of our French and New Caledonian team members a few hours before us. In a day or two the ketch *Parenthèse* would arrive to complete our numbers.

Two years of planning lay behind our AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC-sponsored expedition. But my fascination with Vanikoro's secret had begun 10 years before that. I'd read about the tragedy and my imagination was immediately fired not only by the realisation that if those

French sailors had not been caught in that fateful storm the history of the Pacific region might have turned out differently, but also by the knowledge that somewhere on that reef lay the answers to riddles that had puzzled historians for nearly two centuries. It wasn't until 1984, when I was approached by the Association Salomon of Noumea, that I was able to become directly involved.

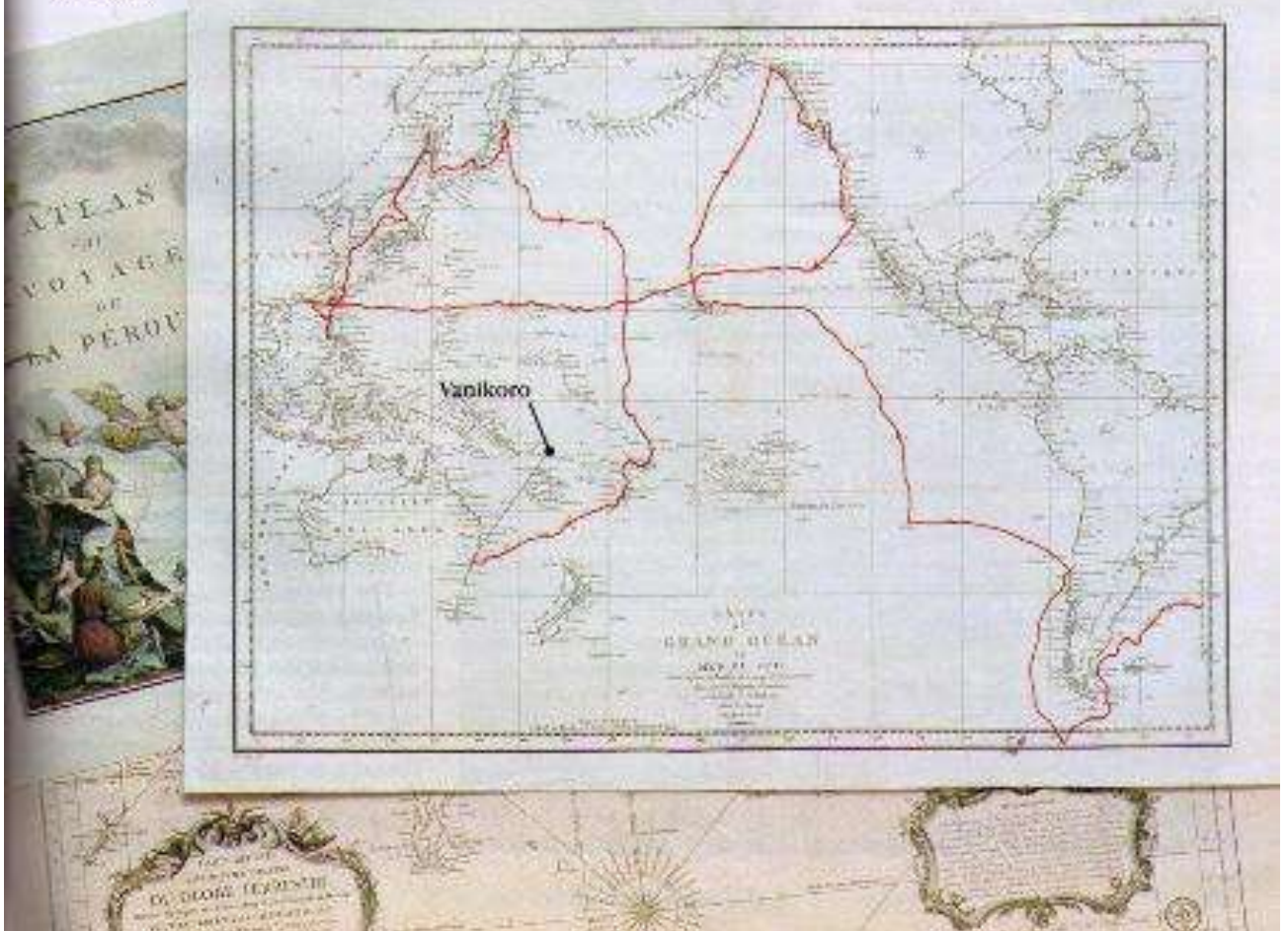
With an expedition looking more and more definite, I threw myself into the planning. Obtaining permission from the various Solomon Islands authorities to dive at Vanikoro was the most time-consuming part of the exercise. In August 1985 I flew to the Solomon Islands and spent many days sitting cross-legged on the ground explaining to local chiefs in pidgin English what

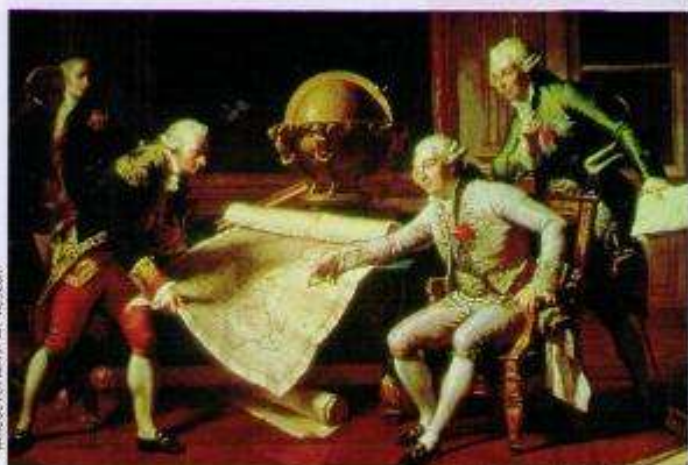


Tropical forest crowds the mouth of Vanikoro's Laurence River. The village of Peu nestles among the trees on the right. The white object on the left is a monument to La Perouse built by members of an expedition in 1959.

By the time La Perouse reached Botany Bay he had been at sea for three years. His voyage ranks with Captain Cook's among the great scientific and navigational achievements of the 18th century. Below: La Perouse's route

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JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID, 1788

Louis XVI of France (second from right) commissions La Pérouse in 1785 to undertake a voyage of the Pacific. "His Majesty will consider it as one of the happiest events of the expedition if it should end without costing the life of a single man," the king said. Unhappily, both ships and many lives were lost. In 1793, just before being guillotined, Louis reportedly asked: "At least, do we have news of Monsieur La Pérouse?"



the expedition aimed to do. Eventually, with the negotiations behind us, we could get down to planning the details of the venture.

IN Botany Bay on 24 January 1788, 11 weatherbeaten sailing ships rode quietly at anchor. At the mouth of a nearby creek a party of men, watched by red-coated soldiers, loaded casks of fresh water onto several small boats. Squatting on a rock nearby, a group of black men pensively surveyed the activity below.

Captain Arthur Phillip's First Fleet had arrived from England a few days earlier after a tedious eight-month voyage. Aboard were the basic elements from which a new colony was to be built in this wild country: building materials, livestock, seeds, tools – and convicts. They had come 17 years after Captain James Cook in the *Endeavour* had charted the coastline and claimed it in the name of King George III. Joseph Banks, botanist on Cook's voyage, had named the bay. But, however attractive it was to a botanist, Captain Phillip decided

it was unsuitable for a permanent settlement.

The ships in the bay were being prepared to sail a few kilometres north to what Phillip later described as "the finest harbour in the world". As the men laboured, lookouts at the bay's entrance signalled that two French ships had been sighted. Questions immediately arose in the minds of the English. Were England and France at war again? What were these French ships doing here?

The French ships were under the command of Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de La Pérouse (he signed himself Lapérouse) who, in 1785, had been commissioned by King Louis XVI to undertake a four-year voyage of the Pacific. Initially the aim was to find regions for commercial exploitation but in the end the voyage was to be one of scientific exploration. In this it would challenge the achievements of the man the French had dubbed "the incomparable Cook".

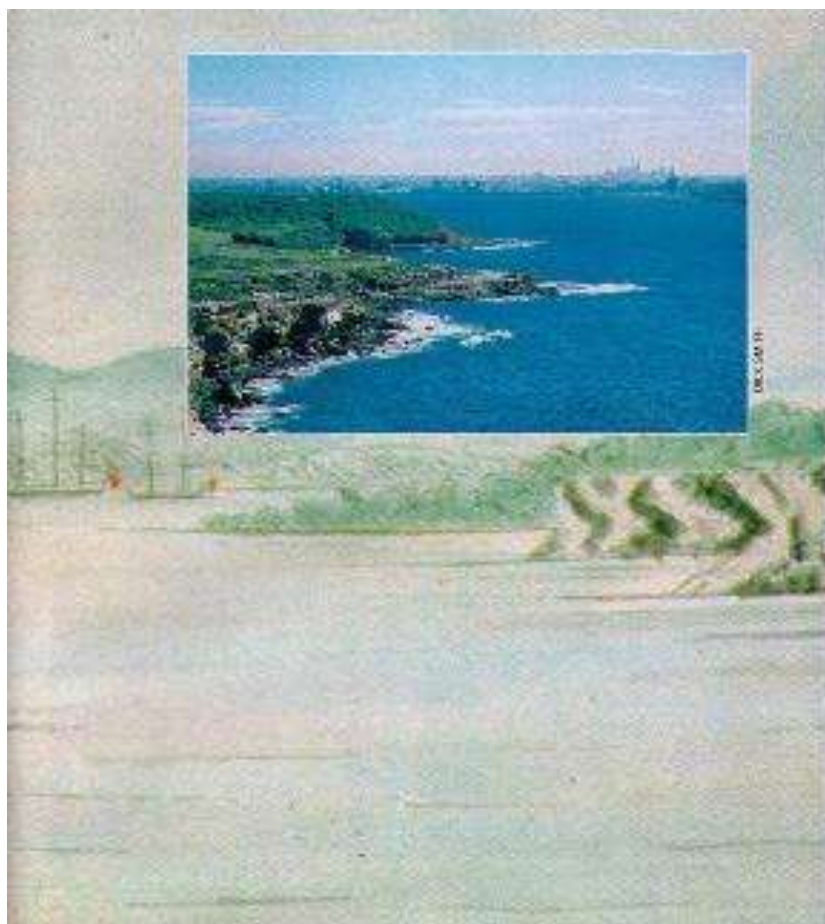
When La Pérouse's ships, *Boussole* and *Astrolabe* (the Compass and the Sextant), sailed from Brest on 1 August 1785, nothing had been

left to chance. Cook's journals and those of his predecessors had been carefully scrutinised. Experts in navigation, medicine, botany, biology, geology, astronomy and physics had prepared charts, recommendations, schedules of experiments and extensive equipment lists for the expedition. Even the British had contributed: Sir Joseph Banks, proving that science transcended national borders, loaned two of Cook's instruments.

Requests poured in from people wanting to join the expedition. One is said to have come from a military academy student named Bonaparte. Had the future emperor been picked for the voyage, European history might have been quite different.

The two ships sailed down the Atlantic, around Cape Horn and up to Concepción in Chile. Then they headed for Easter Island and the Sandwich Isles (Hawaii) and up towards Alaska. While they were exploring the Alaskan coastline, tragedy struck: 21 men were drowned in heavy seas.

After charting much of the west coast of North America, La Pérouse



Botany Bay then and now...

A watercolour from the journal of William Bradley, first lieutenant in HMS Sirius, shows some of Captain Arthur Phillip's First Fleet in Botany Bay in January 1788. La Perouse's two ships, *Boussole* and *Astrolabe*, were sighted on 24 January, four days after the last of Phillip's ships had anchored. The inset shows the same view today.

The Sydney suburb of La Perouse was named after the French explorer, whose sailors built a palisade beside Botany Bay during their six weeks there in 1788. A monument to La Perouse, erected in 1826 by the men of two visiting French warships, stands off Anzac Parade about 100 m from where the La Perouse expedition's chaplain and naturalist, Father Le Rousseur, was buried.



PHOTO: GABRIEL CORNIGLIANO/GETTY IMAGES



Martin Buchart, a Prussian living on Tikopia Island some 250 km from Vanikoro, told adventurer Peter Dillon in 1826 that objects, apparently from wrecked ships, had been brought to Tikopia by Vanikoro islanders. Dillon visited Vanikoro in 1827 and found relics, including those above, that provided a vital clue to the La Perouse expedition's fate.

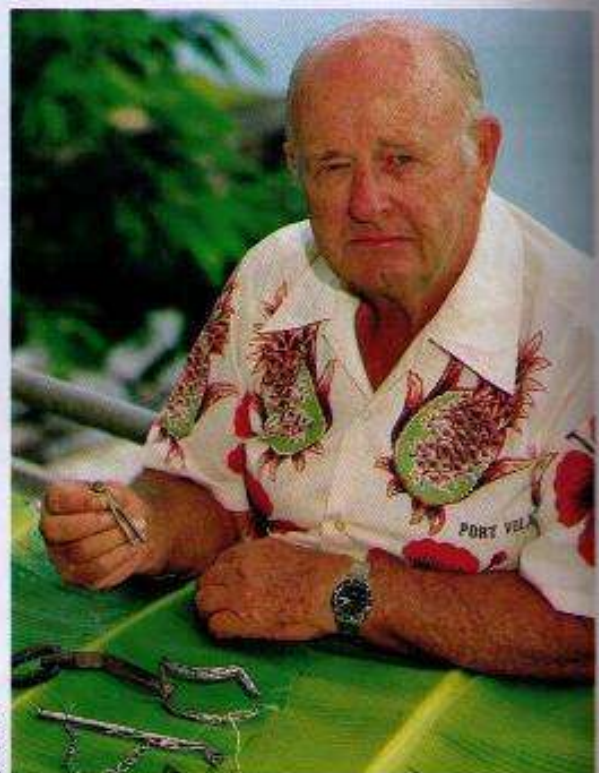


PHOTO: PETER ANDERSON



VANUATU: MARTIN W. ZIEGLER

A skindiver grasps an anchor from the *Astrolabe* in False Pass during Reece Discombe's 1958 expedition.



Vanuatu-based New Zealander Reece Discombe, who organised expeditions to Vanikoro in 1958 and 1959, with relics from the *Astrolabe*.

sailed across the Pacific to Macao, then to Manila and up the coast of China to the Kamcatka peninsula. There he received orders from France to investigate the new English settlement in New Holland (Australia). So he turned his ships south again.

In the Samoan Islands, tragedy struck once more: a shore party gathering water was attacked by islanders who killed several sailors. La Pérouse pressed southwards, passing Norfolk Island where rough seas made landing impossible.

By the time the French reached Botany Bay their three-year voyage had taken its toll on ships as well as men. While there, La Pérouse wrote to a friend: "Whatever professional advantages this expedition may have brought me, you can be certain that few would want them at such cost, and the fatigues of such a voyage cannot be put into words. When I return you will take me for a centenarian. I have no teeth and no hair left and I think it will not be long before I become senile..." He was not yet 47.

Captain Phillip was willing to help the French but, as the English themselves had just completed a long voyage and all their supplies

were needed for the new colony, the best they could do was offer to send mail to France at the earliest opportunity. La Pérouse sent home the journal covering his voyage from Kamcatka to Botany Bay and a letter to the French Minister of Marine outlining his plans for the rest of the voyage. His route would take him to Tonga, New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands, among others, and then round the north coast of Australia. He hoped to reach Mauritius, in the southern Indian Ocean, by December 1788 and be back in France by June the following year.

The French spent more than six weeks in Botany Bay. They built a rough palisade inside which the scientists set up an observatory and the sailors assembled two longboats with frames they had brought from Europe. La Pérouse recorded in his journal that "these precautions were necessary against the Indians of New Holland who, although weak and not numerous, are like all primitive people very mischievous and would burn our boats if they had the means to".

The Aborigines were not the only problem. Several times escaped convicts from Port Jackson approached him seeking asylum. As a guest of

the British in their new colony, La Pérouse was in an awkward position. He sent the convicts back to Phillip who had them flogged.

On 17 February the expedition's chaplain and naturalist, Father Le Receveur, died from injuries received in the Samoan attack. He was buried ashore at what is now the Sydney suburb of La Pérouse.

After making repairs and taking on water and firewood, the French set sail from Botany Bay on 10 March 1788.

They were never heard from again.

BY late 1789 La Pérouse was long overdue and fears were growing in Paris about his expedition. In 1791, Chevalier Bruni d'Entrecasteaux was commissioned to lead a search. Arriving in Cape Town on the southern tip of Africa, he heard that a British Navy officer, Captain John Hunter, had seen natives on the Admiralty Islands (off Papua New Guinea) wearing French uniforms. Coincidentally, Hunter was one of the last Europeans to see La Pérouse before he disappeared - he was captain of HMS *Sirius*, one of the First Fleet ships in Botany Bay when La Pérouse arrived there.



Early morning activity at the stern of Mataray, anchored 500 m offshore. In a moment the inflatable boats will disperse, some to the shore excavations, some to the Boussole site 3 km away and others to the Astrolabe's resting place 4 km away.

Scott "Slippery" Sledge, a contract marine archaeologist from NSW, explains the day's schedule during the morning briefing on Mataray. The divers worked every day of the two weeks that the joint expedition was at Vanikoro.



A few weeks after d'Entrecasteaux sailed, Captain Edward Edwards arrived in Cape Town on his way home after losing his ship, HMS *Pandora*, which had been sent to capture the *Bounty* mutineers. In August 1791, two weeks before she was wrecked, *Pandora* sailed within two or three kilometres of Vanikoro and the remains of the La Pérouse expedition. Had Edwards not been jaded by his lengthy and unsuccessful search for Fletcher Christian and the *Bounty*, the La Pérouse mystery might have been solved there and then.

D'Entrecasteaux's search was unsuccessful but again fate played a cruel game. Only a few days before his death from fever in 1792, his ships passed close to Vanikoro without stopping.

It was not until 1827, nearly 40 years after La Pérouse disappeared, that at least part of the mystery was solved. Captain Peter Dillon, a colourful Irish adventurer, heard from islanders on Vanikoro that about 40 years previously there had been a great cyclone. The day after the storm there were two ships on the reef. One, opposite the village of Peu, broke up very quickly and sank with only four survivors.



As a precaution against the bends, the potentially lethal decompression sickness, two divers returning from 40 m breathe pure oxygen for six minutes from a tank 3 m below a Zodiac. The bends are caused by returning too quickly from the high pressure of deep water to atmospheric pressure. Divers returning from 60 m had to make an additional stop at 10 m.



On the edge of nothingness, a diver lays the survey line along the gutter into which Boussole sank. Bubbles from a second diver can be seen rising beyond the rim of the reef.

Writing on an underwater slate,
Raymond Proner, a commercial diver from Noumea and a member of the expedition's Swat Team, records the location of relics found at 40 m.





The other, a short distance to the north, remained stuck on the reef. There were many survivors from this wreck and they set up a camp at Peu where they built a small vessel from salvaged timbers and sailed away, never to be seen or heard of again. They left two men behind, a "chief" and his servant. Dillon was told the "chief" had died only two years previously and the servant had fled the island shortly after. This means they had been on the island when both Edwards and d'Entrecasteaux sailed past.

Dillon bartered with the natives for such salvaged material as they had and subsequently proved that the La Pérouse ships had indeed been wrecked on the island.

Dillon has been followed by many French expeditions trying to determine just what became of La Pérouse. But it was Reece Discombe, a New Zealander living in Vanuatu, who in 1957 discovered the remains of one of the ships. A few years later the remains of the second wreck were found. Our expedition, organised by the Queensland Museum in

Brisbane, the Association Salomon of Noumea, the La Pérouse Association of Albi in France, and the Solomons National Museum, would conduct the first methodical and scientific archaeological investigation of the sites.

EXPLORING shipwrecks affects people in different ways. Naturally, if you don't understand what you're looking at or don't know the history behind the wreck, it can be merely a curiosity with little meaning - just another lump of man's junk in nature's garden. But when you've studied the history and can identify with the people and the circumstances of the wreck, then the dreamlike weightlessness you experience as you descend to the blue-grey, unearthly scene of the tragedy can be an emotional experience. The broken, scattered remains of a ship, everything in disarray, speaks of violence and the agonising fear of dying men. To find and touch an item that you know is connected with a particular individual can be

Dinner is served... Five-star food and service was the norm on Mantaray for the nine Australian members of the Vanikoro expedition.

a thrill and a shock. You are the first to touch this piece of history since it became history.

Although the two wreck sites had already been well explored and the position of the survivors' camp ashore established fairly accurately, many questions remained unanswered. What course did La Pérouse sail from Botany Bay to this uncharted island? Which wreck was which? If the ship that broke up rapidly on the outside of the reef was *Boussole*, La Pérouse's flagship, it is very unlikely that he survived the wreck. The islanders told Dillon that the four survivors of this wreck were not "chiefs" but common seamen (one report says there were actually six, all of whom were killed by the islanders when they reached the shore). Who then was the "chief" left behind with his servant and why didn't they leave with the others? Had an account that would answer all these questions been left