

New Hebrides Islanders Prove Their Manhood by Leaping
Headfirst to Earth from a 65-foot Jungle Tower

BY IRVING AND ELECTA JOHNSON

IN our round-the-world cruises in the brigantine *Yankee*, we Johnsons see more than our share of the strange and curious. Nevertheless, we were almost incredulous at the sight we witnessed in the New Hebrides last spring— Islanders diving from a tall tower, not into water but onto land.

Until three years before, we had never even heard of this amazing performance. We learned of it from our good friend Oscar Newman when we called on him and his wife at their home on the New Hebrides island of Malekula (map, page 82). At first we thought he was joking.

Divers Land in "Pool" of Earth

On the neighboring island of Pentecost, Mr. Newman said, the natives have a custom of building a tower on the side of a hill and then, on a given day, climbing it and jumping off, headfirst, to the ground on the downhill side.

"How high? Sixty, seventy, eighty feet," he said, "and the record is even higher."

"Why aren't they all killed?" we asked.

"Well for one thing, the earth they dive into is pulverized and cleared of stones and sticks, but the main thing is the jungle vines attached to their ankles and the tower. They are measured exactly right to let the man's head hit the ground but stop him before his neck breaks."

Mr. Newman and his wife had lived on Pentecost for years and were old friends of the natives there.

"Let me know when you're coming back," he said, "and I'll get them to wait and put on the show when you're here. Only a few white people have ever seen it."

Thus it was with a real sense of excitement that we neared the New Hebrides on our 1953-55 trip, our sixth cruise around the world with a crew of American college students.*

We had kept in touch with Mr. Newman, and he made good his promise 100 percent.

Wall, the chief of the village of jumpers, was a jolly, rotund fellow.

"In his younger days," Mr. Newman told us, "Wall was the champion land diver of

all time. I've seen him do a hundred feet."

On the day before the ceremony, Wall led us inland to see the tower. On the way he told us how the odd custom is supposed to have started.

"It was all because of a woman," he began. "She ran away from her husband with another man, and when pursued she took refuge in the top of a tall coconut palm. Her husband had followed and was about to grab her when she leaped from the treetop and got away unhurt. Everyone was stupefied until it was realized that she had tied vines to her ankles to break her fall.

"Her feat was still pretty impressive, but the men said to themselves, 'Anything a woman can do, we can do better.' Then they proceeded to prove to each other how brave they were by headfirst jumping demonstrations from greater and greater heights."

"Each year," Mr. Newman explained, "the men select a new hillside site for the ceremony. First the workers clear the jungle, an arduous job in itself. They spade up soil in the dry-land diving pit and soften it by hand. Saving a high tree as the tower's main brace, they strip off leaves and twigs but spare two or three strong branches as supports."

Jungle Tower Built Without Nails

A maze of small, straight tree trunks lashed with vines, the tower stood 65 feet above its base and a measured 78 feet above the landing target on the downhill side (page 78).

No nail or wire held it anywhere. Green viny backstays, stretching like a circus tent's guy ropes, secured the tower to stumps in the rear. At various heights 28 platforms jutted like diving boards from its front. Long curling vines were attached at the tower end of each board. They were soon to be lashed around the divers' ankles.

Had they been stretched to their full length, each pair of woody lianas would have ended

* See, in the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE: "Yankee Roams the Orient," March, 1951; "The Yankee's Wander-world," January, 1949; and "Westward Bound in the Yankee," January, 1942, all by Irving and Electa Johnson.



six to eight feet above the ground (page 82). The correct length is a matter of life or death. A vine cut too long would not stretch its limit in time to save a man's neck. Too short a vine would joltingly arrest his flight in mid-air.

Vines were shredded at the ends to make soft, pliable ties for the ankles, and these lashings were wrapped in banana leaves to keep them moist and fresh (pages 80-81).

Shouting and singing from the jungle signaled the arrival of Pentecost's dancing and cheering squad. Dressed especially for Western eyes, the men wore shorts in lieu of the usual patch of leaf matting and had coconut fronds draped across their backs (page 85). Women put on cloth petticoats beneath short skirts of shredded pandanus leaves, but remained bare to the waist.

Chanting, whistling, and cheering, the dancers marshaled themselves

into six lines, men in front, women behind. A veteran choreographer named Beconan infused the troupe with life and spirit. He changed the chants, beat out rhythms with his club, and leaped about like a clown (page 83).

As the dancers ended their overture, the jumpers began to perform.

The first dive was the lowest, 25 feet, and the jumper the youngest, eight years. As the boy climbed the tower for his first jump, we felt glad it was not one of our sons risking his neck to prove he was a man.

(Continued on page 87)

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← **A New Hebrides Man
Atop His High Tower
Stands Ready to Dive
Headlong for the Earth**

While making a world voyage on the brigantine *Yankee*, skipper Irving Johnson and his college-student crew stopped at Pentecost Island, New Hebrides, to watch Melanesians make terrifying land dives, checked only by trailing vines tied to their ankles. Climaxing the show, a champion diver named Warisul climbed to the highest platform, lashed on vines, and made a speech. A moment later he spread his arms wide and sailed into space, dropping 78 feet.

Just as the man was about to hit earth, pressure from the arresting vines snapped springy green boughs supporting his diving platform, causing the board to slant downward. Timed to a split second, this action broke the diver's fall. Then, as his head hit the dirt, the tautly stretched vines and the recoil of the rickety tower snapped him onto his feet unharmed.

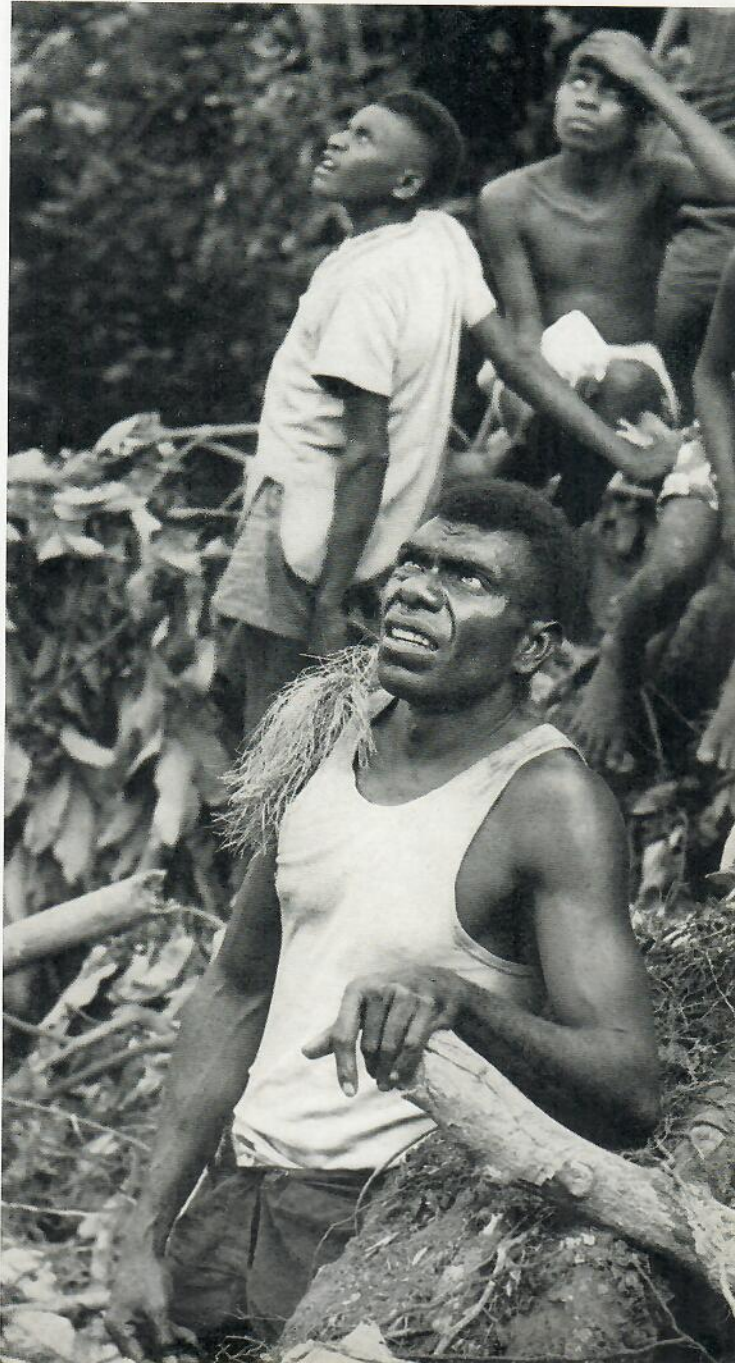
Here the champion's assistant checks the vines' anchorage to the tower. Sagging boards used by previous divers appear below the two men.

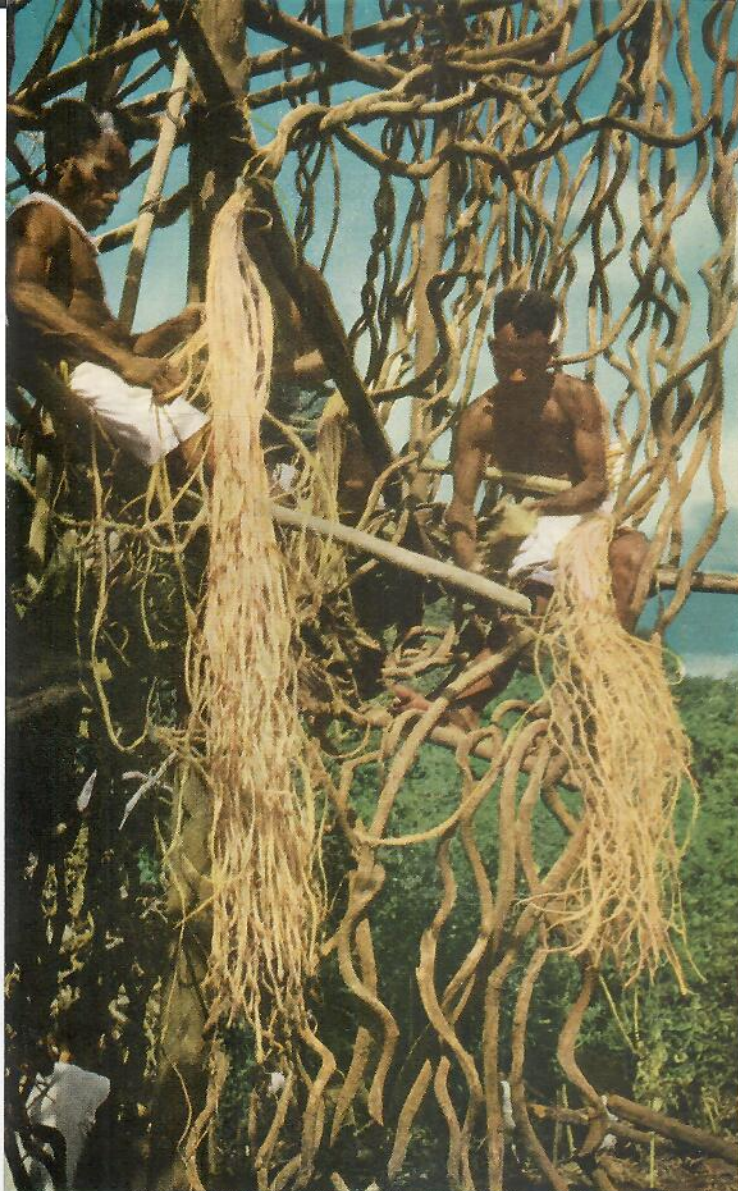
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Kodachrome by Irving Johnson

**Wide-eyed Watchers →
Tensely Wait**

The rapt look of small boys at a circus is stamped on faces in the jungle audience.

Roger Bellinger





High Diver Walks a Plank → Above Forest and Sea

According to legend, the land dive originated when a runaway wife leaped from a tall palm tree to escape her avenging husband (page 77).

Here a Pentecost man stands ready to show his mettle. He moves on the board with care lest his weight snap the platform before he takes off. Soon he will wave the leaves in his belt as a farewell salute, mount the two prongs on either side of the plank, and sail headfirst into space.

Vines tied to the man's legs run beneath the board's wrappings to a secure anchorage. Lianas on either side hang ready for the next divers.

Upper right: Moist banana leaves encase vine ends to keep ankle ties soft and pliable until jumping time.

Kodachromes by Irving Johnson and
(far right) Dodd Harris

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↑ Vines Are Frayed to Make Ankle Straps for Jumpers

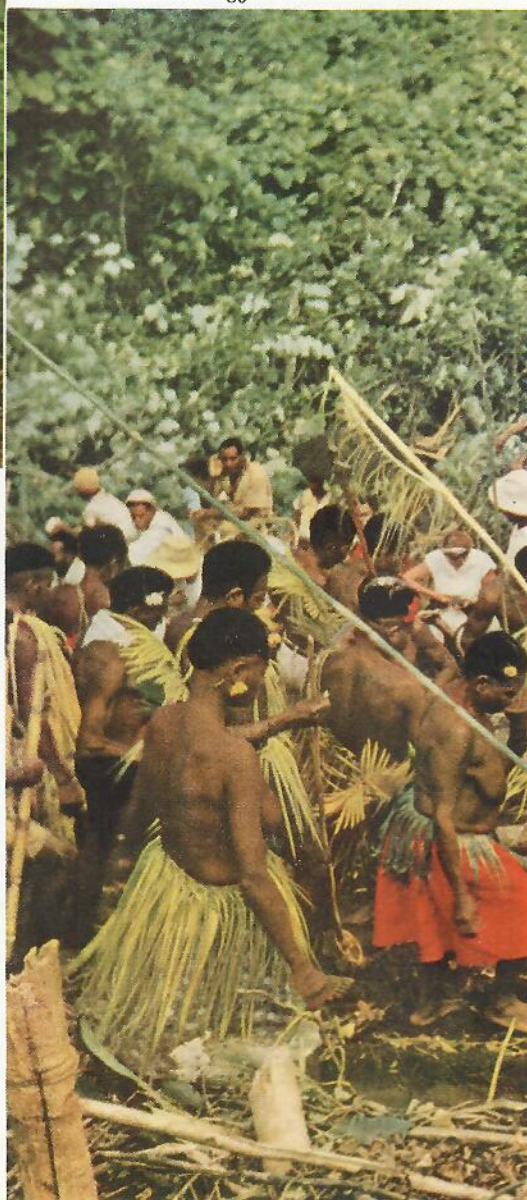
In preparation for dives, Melanesians scour the Pentecost jungles for long, strong lianas. These they lash to the tower. Free ends of the vines are shredded into strong fibers that are knotted around the ankles of the divers. Last spring 28 islanders took the plunge from different heights on the tower. The youngest was 8 years.

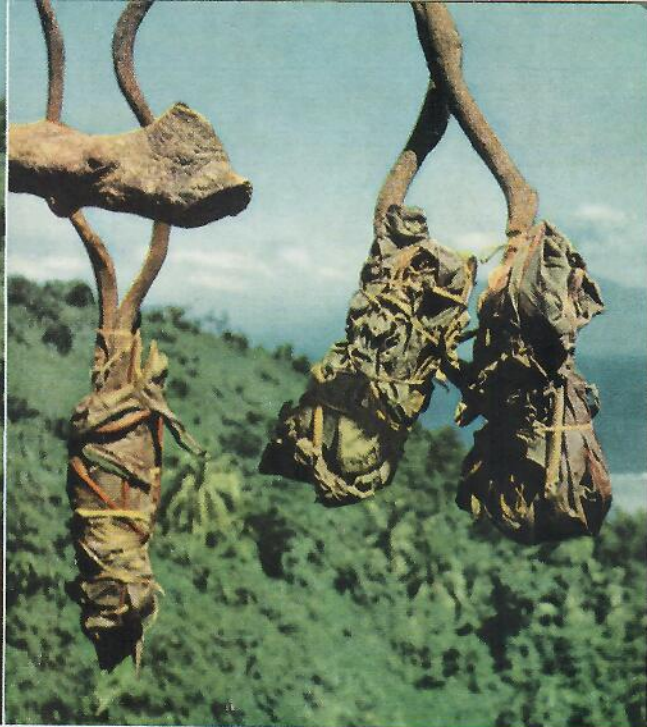
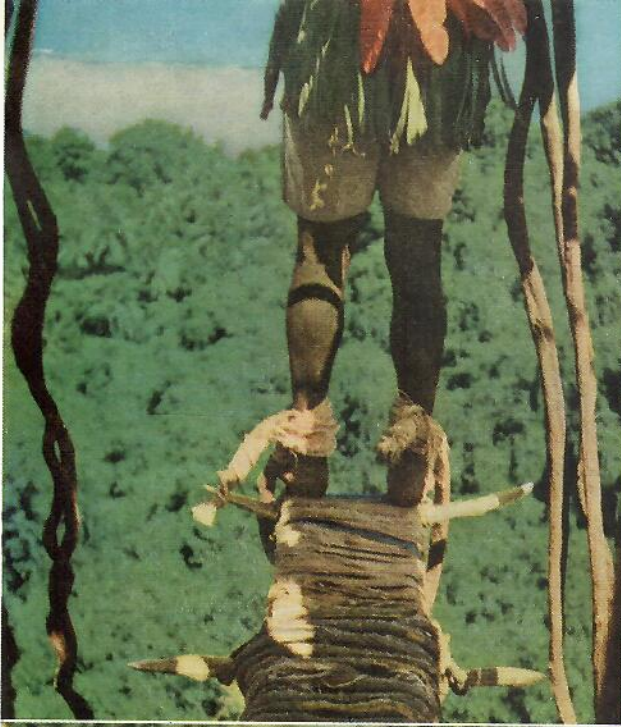
Dancers Prance Between Jumps; → Their Chants Fan the Divers' Courage

Bodies glistening with coconut oil, Pentecost dancers swirled for six hours. Their routine was simple: a few stamps on one foot, then on the other (page 83). In deference to Western visitors, men wore shorts instead of the usual patch of matted leaves. Women put on cloth skirts beneath garments of rustling leaves. Here planter Oscar Newman looks toward the next jumper on the tower.

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Kodachromes by Roger Bellinger and (right) Arthur Johnson







← **A Diver Tests Gear:
Too Long a Vine
Could Take His Life**

Lianas are cut to dangle six to eight feet above ground. Tied to a diver's ankles, they tauten just as his head hits earth. A split second more and the man's neck might snap.

Roger Bellinger

↓ **Volcanoes Built
the New Hebrides**

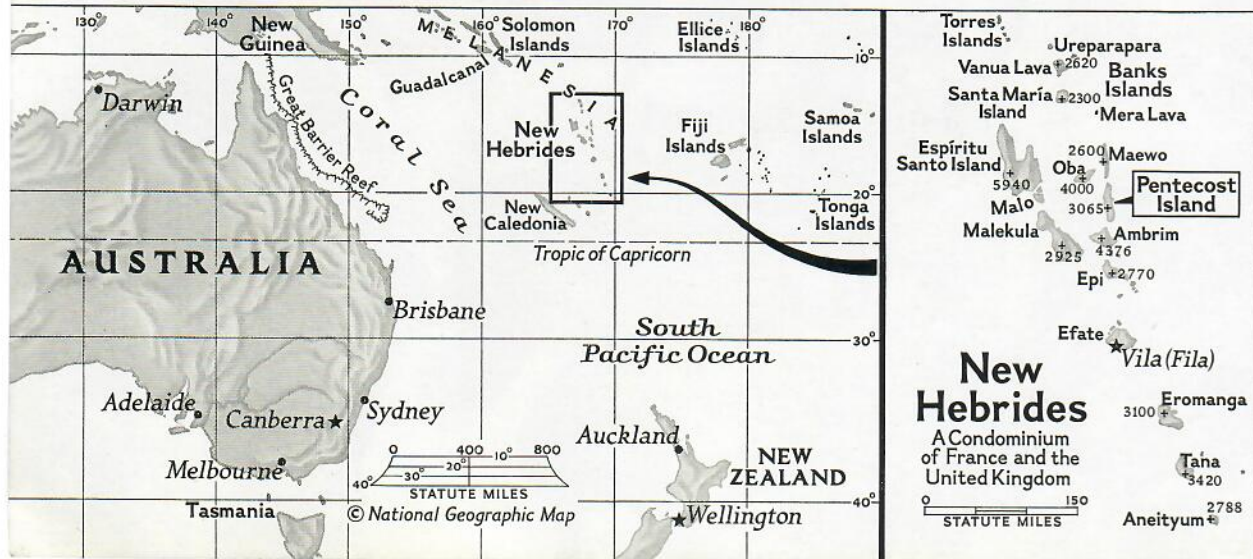
Pedro Fernández de Quirós, a navigator for Spain, discovered the islands in 1606. He thought Espiritu Santo was Australia. Capt. James Cook, exploring 168 years later, named the group New Hebrides.

During the 19th century, labor recruiters, commonly called blackbirders, kidnaped islanders by the hundreds for work on cotton and sugar plantations in Australia. As a result, innocent travelers found the New Hebrideans treacherous. Many visitors were killed by cannibals. Eromanga became known as the "island of martyrs" after six missionaries were murdered.

Fifty-odd islands, covering an area larger than Connecticut, compose the New Hebrides chain. Map shows only the larger isles, home of most of the 52,600 people.

British and French have ruled jointly from the capital city of Vila on Efate since 1906. The Japanese did not invade the archipelago in World War II.

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Kodachromes by Arthur Johnson and (below) Dodd Harris

↑ **A Maze of Timbers and Lianas Leads to the Jumping Platform**

This flimsy-looking contraption, which swayed and trembled each time the divers took off, proved sturdy enough when Mr. Johnson and his crew scrambled over it to make pictures. Jungle engineers used no nails or wires; they lashed the soaring tower with vines.

↓ **Frenzy Mounts Among the Dancers as Jumpers Climb to New Heights**

Quaking palm-frond drapery and swinging wooden batons intensify the dancers' gyrations. Here and there one of them tucks a flashy hibiscus blossom into woolly hair (page 85). Beconan, the master of ceremonies, wears a palm-leaf skirt around his neck.

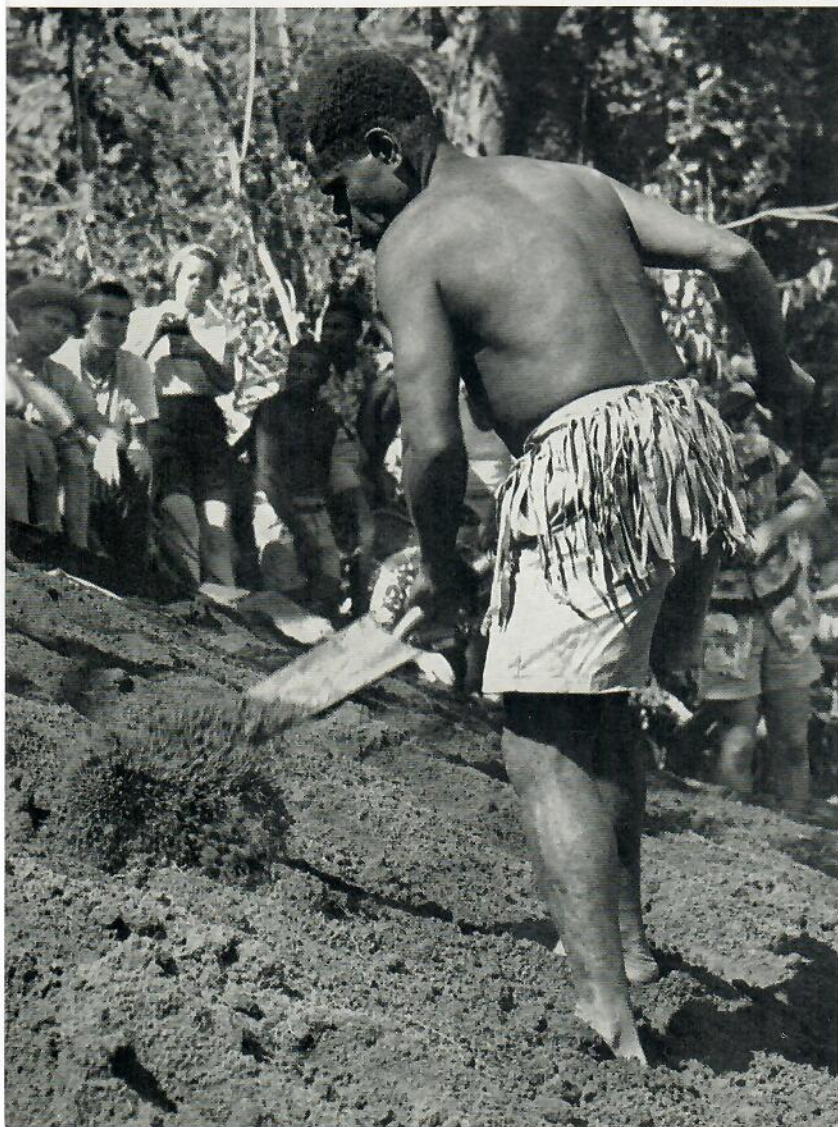


**Dancers Face the Sky →
Like Firemen with
a Rescue Net**

Groundlings watching the highest dives were so spellbound they stopped chanting and stamping. The profound silence proved more dramatic than the wildest shouts. Coral lime whitens the close-cropped heads of these islanders.

Thousands of Americans got to know the New Hebrides people in World War II, when the United States established military bases on Espiritu Santo and Efate Islands. Islanders did a brisk business selling pigs' tusks, clubs, canoes, and grass skirts to servicemen. Espiritu Santo served as an air base during the Guadalcanal campaign.

Wartime New Hebrides and neighboring islands inspired the musical play "South Pacific."



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**← Earth Is Pulverized
to Soften the Blow**

To prepare the jumping ground, workers first cleared sticks and stones from the space beneath the tower. They spaded the soil, then laboriously sifted it by hand to make the landing spot as cushiony as possible. Earth fluffing was repeated for each jump.

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**A Drinker Tilts →
His Bamboo Jug**

A length of bamboo severed just beyond one of the joints holds a man-size drink (page 92).

Roger Bellinger





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Kodachrome by Irving Johnson

Headfirst Goes the Jumper, Flying Earthward from His Lofty Tower

As the man kicked off into space, the tower trembled so violently the photographer had to grab support. When vines snapped taut, the structure rocked again as if in a gale. Cameramen on the ground focus on the leaper.

A relative, serving as the lad's second, untied the green leaves encasing the vine ends, shook out the long shreds, and knotted the ends of the lines around the slender ankles.

The youngster advanced to the end of the platform and shook each foot in turn to make sure the dangling vines hung clear. He forced a smile, slapped his hands against his sides, then clapped them high above his head. From a waist belt he took a spray of leaves, waved it bravely, and cast it earthward. Then he followed it into space.

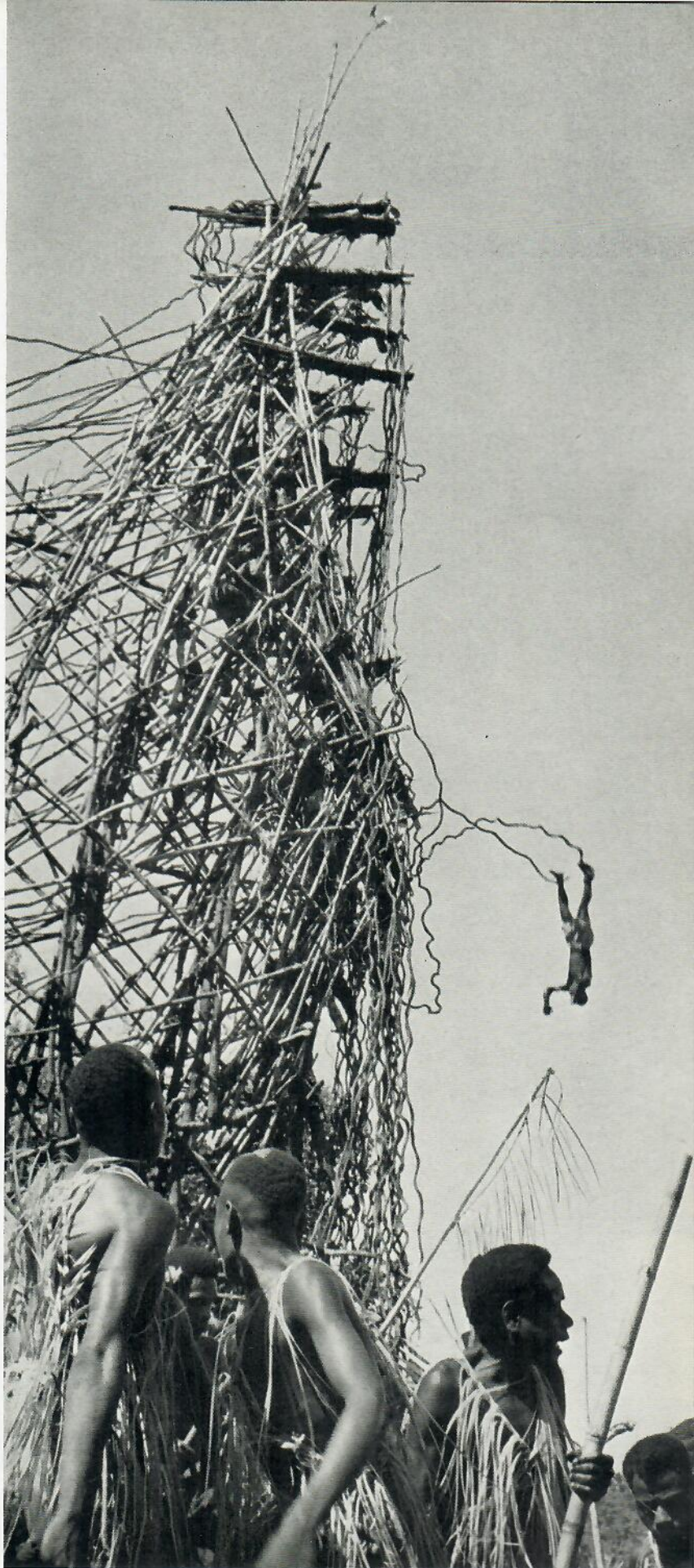
At just the right moment, tension from the vines broke the diving platform's props. The collapse of the platform slowed the diver's fall. As the boy's head touched the ground, the vines stretched taut and, recoiling like steel springs, snapped his legs into the air. Then the slackened vines dropped the boy to earth. Friends and family rushed in, picked up the child, and brushed off the dust.

The next boy took a look at the void before him and stepped back in dismay, but his second pushed him sprawling. Landing safely, the child grinned in relief and triumph.

As the jumps got higher, excitement mounted and

Going Down! A Diver Heads for Bottom

Softened earth, elastic vines, and the tower's recoil will ease the jolt when this man reaches the end of his rope. He must land as far as possible from the tower lest the vines prove too long for safety.







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Kodachromes by Arthur Johnson

↑

Women Reach Out as if to Save a Man Tumbling from the Tower

← Page 88: To build suspense before taking off, divers balance precariously on the platform, wave arms, and shout messages. Others arch over backward and pretend to fall. Here, as his "ready" signal, diver Olul waves a flag of bright leaves. In a moment he will drop it, and all eyes will follow its flutter to the ground. One spectator remarked, "The diver salutes his world like a gladiator hailing a Roman emperor."



Striking the Jumping Pit, a Diver Absorbs the First Shock with His Arms

This man shows cowardice, according to native code. Proper technique demands that his head be the first to hit earth. The most skillful jumpers land on their feet after the snapback.

preparations took longer. These gratifying delays gave *Yankee's* photographers time to adjust cameras. Throughout six hours of diving we made more than 1,600 pictures.

A few of us climbed the creaking, swaying tower to snap a jumper leaping from the platform (page 86). When the vines stopped his plunge, the tower trembled violently.

The higher a diver climbed, the better his act. One man posed motionless against the sky. Another performed a ghostly slow-motion pantomime with his arms. Others sang, shouted messages, or pretended to fall.

During dramatic intervals Beconan and his

dancers stopped stamping and chanting. At other times women broke into an eerie whistle and held arms outstretched (page 89).

Two men faltered and refused to jump, but substitutes quickly took their places.

Sometimes a vine broke; once both lashings snapped, but only after the man's fall was safely checked (opposite page).

We estimated that the topmost diver reached a speed of 45 miles an hour; but, incredibly, not a bone broke, not one dancer limped away. Blood flowed only from a man who scratched his ankle.

A rub on the back, a pull of the hair to

**Both Vines Broke →
After Arresting
This Man's Fall**

A cut right ankle, here seen in a bandage, was Olul's sole injury and the only apparent harm suffered by any of the jumpers. Draped in palm fronds, he lets a friend slash the lashings from his left ankle. This was not Olul's first dive of the day; he substituted earlier for a jumper who balked.

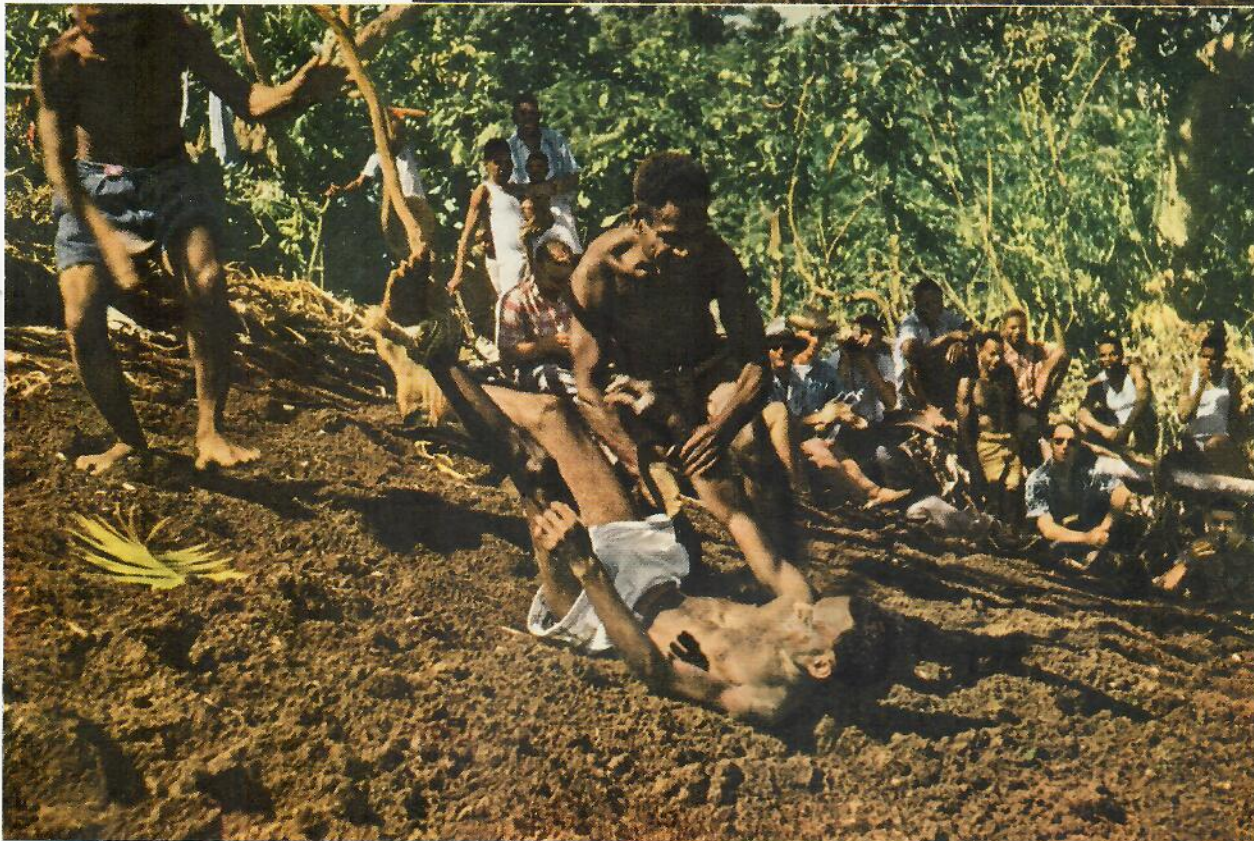
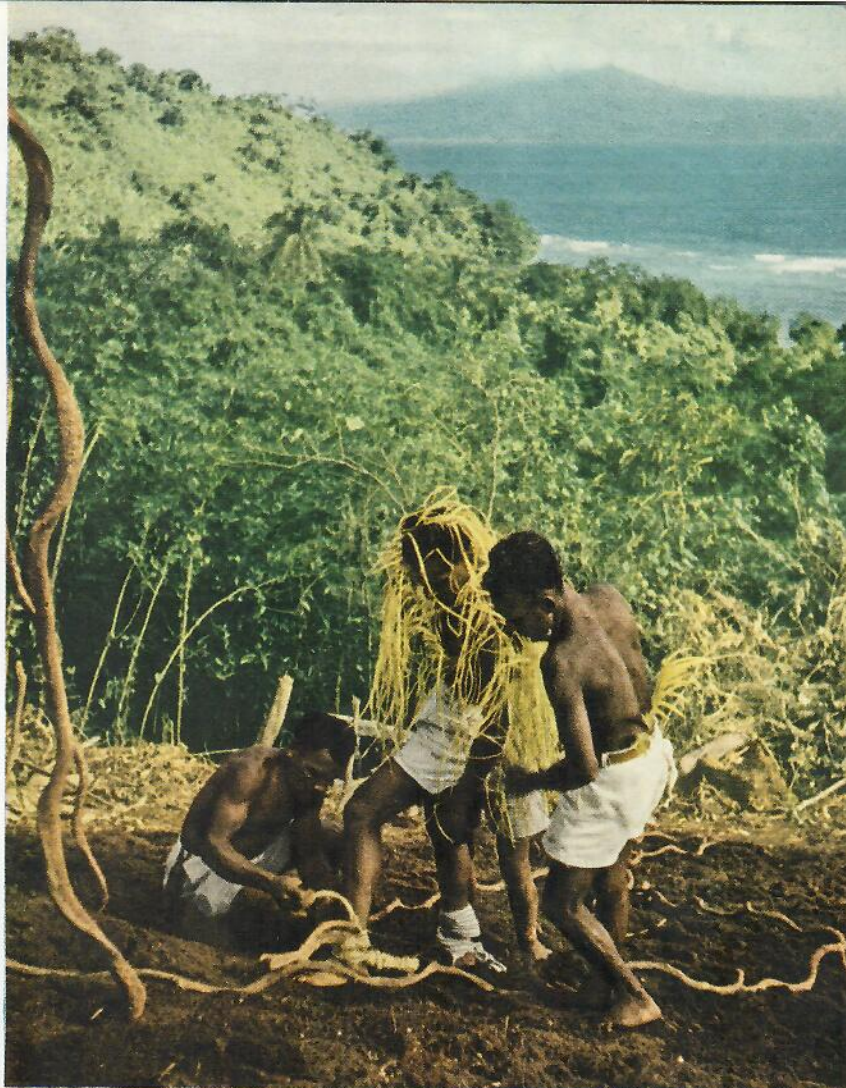
Clouds of dust in the distance rise from volcanic Ambrim Island. *Yankee's* crewmen a few days earlier saw it erupting by night. Fiery "bombs" shot high into the air and fell back onto the cone.

**↓ His Ordeal Ended,
a Diver Smiles**

Yankee's doctor, a bone specialist, could not understand how the human skeleton held together under the shocks taken by the divers. Most walked away none the worse for wear. Others required "treatment"—shaking by the hair, massage of the neck, and dousing with water.

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Anseo Color by Roger Bellinger (above)
and Kodachrome by
Edward K. Shelmerdine

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A Leaper's Friend Supports Him; the Water Girl Brings Refreshment in a Bamboo Tube
"Middle-aged Bebe," comments planter Newman, "was a little shaken by his jump. He insisted on making the leap because he hated to see the young bucks get all the credit."

straighten the neck, or a splash of cold water restored men who, it seemed to us, must surely have had the life jerked out of them.

No aircraft carrier's arresting gear ever stopped a fighter plane as abruptly as the jungle lianas halted these divers in full flight. Our ship's doctor could not explain why hips were not dislocated. Chief Wall told us that no diver in his memory had been killed.

Pentecost Champion Leaps 78 Feet

Close to day's end the tower still held firm. Only the final jump from the topmost platform remained.

Now the bravest man of them all, a handsome young aerialist named Warisul, began the long climb to the top amid a fanfare of screams from the dancers' chorus (page 78).

A slim, lonely figure against the sky, Warisul stood on the end of his platform and

spoke to the crowd. Friends had urged him not to risk his life, he said; yet he must.

The young man tossed his spray of leaves as if in gallant salute to the volcano on near-by Ambrim Island, which he could see puffing dust above the blue Pacific. Calling up the final spark of courage, he leaped off and out, an arching drop of 78 feet.

Timed to a split second, the platform props cracked and the board dropped, braking the fall. Warisul's head struck the earth, the elastic vines stretched and convulsed, and pulled him back into the air.

One vine broke! But the other jerked Warisul up the slope. With the dexterity of a cat he landed on his feet. Women rushed up, tugged his hair, and splashed cold water in his face.

Then, acrobatics ended, divers and dancers raced off to their jungle village for a feast.

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