

# Falling tree branch kills Peace Corps

By Esther Tinning

**A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER,** John Roberts from the United States of America died instantly after a tree branch fell on him and an Erromango man, Sonis Nompwi, a Community Member of South River.

It all happened on Thursday October 11 at 10am.

The late Roberts was assigned to Vetumit Rural Training Center in the very remotely located village of South River and has lived with the Community for the past two years.

Information from Peace Corps office stated that one of the students was asked to cut a branch on a large tree near the garden.

Everyone on the ground stood in a place where they thought they would be out of

harm's way when the branch would fall.

The student in the tree used an axe to cut down the branch. When the branch fell, it went in an unexpected direction and hit a much larger branch, about one foot in diameter and located further below on the tree.

This larger branch then broke away from the tree and fell directly on John's head.

Peace Corps received word about John's death at approximately 1:15 pm from Steven Bob, the Manager of the RTC and John's counterpart. Steven called by HF Radio to Peace Corps from South River to inform them about John's death.

A helicopter was chartered by Peace Corps and the Peace Corps Medical Officer, Jane

Laycock was flown to South River to confirm the volunteer's death and to return with the body.

John was then transported with a Peace Corps flag covering him to the Vila City Hospital where a self-contained refrigerated unit was set-up for John's body. His body was flown back to the US over the weekend following a funeral service at the PMC.

Reports reaching the Daily Post revealed that with John's help the Training Center had strengthened South River's transportation, the communities income generation and communication capabilities.

John's patient but pragmatic approach resulted in the Training Center becoming the springboard for a number of "firsts" in the

development of South River.

The community of less than two hundred acquired its first engine powered boat for transportation; its first community managed high frequency radio for communication with the outside world; a solar produced electricity and lighting system for the Training Center; the expansion of agroforestry and the increased availability of timber for community use.

John's most lasting accomplishment in the hearts of the people of South River can only be measured by the warmth of human relationships.

As one community representative said, "John helped us develop our rural training center and community, but



Late John Roberts was liked by all Erromangoans he came into contact with

what we will really remember is that he lived with us, ate with us, played with us, grieved with us and rejoiced with us... he was our son."

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister of Vanuatu Ham Lini shared the country's condolences to the families and friends of John Robert.