

WORLD WAR II WRECK DIVING IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

A diver is seen in the upper right quadrant of the image, illuminated by their own lights. They are positioned above a large, rusted metal structure that is part of a shipwreck. The water is a deep, clear blue, and the overall scene is one of quiet exploration.

In the first of a series of features, Don Silcock embarks on an exploration of some of the World War Two wrecks that can be found in the waters around the Solomon Islands

Photographs by Don Silcock

“ If you like World War Two wrecks, then a Wreck Week trip is a must-do, as the number and variety of recreational diving sites is hard to beat - I have only written about less than half of those I dived! ”

Located at the eastern tip of the renowned Coral Triangle, the Solomon Islands consists of a long string of beautiful tropical islands, surrounded by the deep trenches and basins of the vast Pacific Ocean to the east and the Solomon Sea to the south.

The diving comes in two distinct varieties - excellent reefs nourished by regional and equatorial currents, which deliver eggs and larvae along with rich nutrients from the depths, and numerous World War Two wrecks that are poignant reminders of the country's role in the conflict.

This is the first in a series of articles covering the main diving locations in the Solomons and there is much to write about, as those locations are distributed throughout the country, and each has its own distinct flavour.

The wrecks are divided into two basic categories - those within recreational limits, and those requiring technical diving skills.

We decided to start with the recreational wrecks, mainly because Masters Liveboards made it easier to dive them by inviting me on the Solomons Master for one of their dedicated Wreck Weeks!

The Solomons and World War Two

Following its devastating attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the Japanese moved quickly to establish control over the western Pacific. PNG was their initial target, where they set up regional headquarters in Rabaul, fortified with air and naval bases throughout New Britain, New Ireland, and Bougainville.

Next came the strategically important Solomon Islands, which were to form the outer ring of a Pacific defensive network, from which they could defend Rabaul and attack the US supply lines to Australia and New Zealand.

Their first move was in March 1942, with airstrips established throughout the islands. Then in May, they seized Tulagi and built a seaplane base, followed in June by Guadalcanal, where they constructed a large airfield.

When the tide of war turned following the naval battles of the Coral Sea and Midway, those bases became Allied targets as they shifted to offense in August 1942. The fighting was intense, brutal, and lasted until August 1943.

The Allies lost over 7,100 men, along with 29 ships and 615 aircraft, while the Japanese lost around 31,000 men, plus 38 ships and 683 aircraft.

Many of those wrecks have never been found, but numerous others have, making the Solomons one of the richest concentrations of World War Two wrecks in the ▶

Did you know?

The Catalina Seaplane is lying upright with the cockpit at 26m and the tail at 33m. The wreck is intact apart from the engines which have fallen off and lie on the seafloor beside the wreck. Munitions and machine guns remain in place.



world. So many ships were lost during the Guadalcanal campaign that the area north of Honiara, became known as 'Iron Bottom Sound'.

Diving the World War Two wrecks

The wrecks in and around Iron Bottom Sound are randomly distributed across an area of some 7,000 km². The only way to dive those within recreational limits on a single trip is from a liveaboard, which the Masters Wreck Week is designed to do – and it works very well!

The Russell Islands

Located about 100km northwest of Honiara, the Russell's are a small archipelago of two main islands, Pavuvu and Mbanika, and over 50 smaller islands. Further northwest is the large island of New Georgia - the next target after victory in Guadalcanal - making the Russell's very strategic for the Allies as they prepared for the next campaign.

In February 1943, the archipelago was occupied and transformed into a forward operating base with roads, radar station, PT boat base, housing, hospital facilities, and airfields. Prior to World War Two, fewer than 350 people lived there, but under the Allies, the area became a boomtown with, at its peak, more than 16,000 personnel stationed there.

The first thing to know about the main 'wreck' site at the Russell's is that there isn't a white beach... White Beach was the Allied code name for their initial landing site. When they

finally left in 1945, everything that could not fly was dumped off the main jetty, and the barges that formed it scuttled!

This World War Two scrapyard is now an artificial reef, with everything from trucks, jeeps, tractors, and bulldozers to large amounts of ammunition and Coca-Cola bottles - all located in 5m to 30m, just off the shore.

The Florida Islands

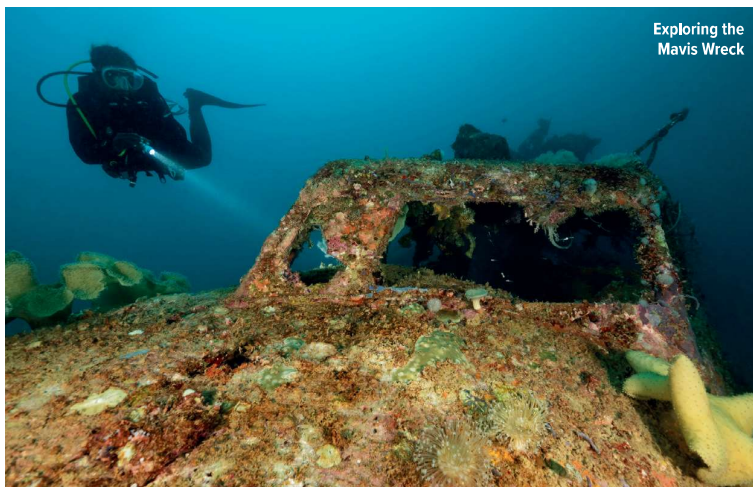
This small group of islands sits roughly halfway between Guadalcanal and Malaita and consists of two larger islands, Nggela Sule and Nggela Pile, separated by the narrow Mboli Passage.

There are also a number of smaller islands, the most significant being the former capital of Tulagi. Post-independence, the group became known as the Nggela Islands, but most people still refer to them as the Florida Islands. There are numerous World War Two wrecks around the islands, including my favourite, the HMNZS Moa...

In December 1942, the New Zealand Navy deployed three Bird-class minesweepers to Guadalcanal, the Moa, Kiwi and Tui, all based on Tulagi and assigned to anti-submarine patrols. The Moa and Kiwi saw major action at the end of January 1943 when, working in tandem, they sank the Japanese submarine I-1 (see below).

In early April, the Moa came under heavy attack from Japanese aircraft while being refuelled near Tulagi harbour. Hit twice with 500lb bombs, she sank in minutes with the

“ This World War Two scrapyard is now an artificial reef, with everything from trucks, jeeps, tractors, and bulldozers to large amounts of ammunition and Coca-Cola bottles ”



Anemone on the Kyusyu Maru wreck



loss of five lives and 15 wounded. The Moa is a fairly deep dive as she sits on a silty bottom in 40m, with the bow submerged in the mud, but is easily covered on a single dive.

The superstructure, made of timber overlaid with brass, was 'liberated' during the late-1970's salvage era. The key things to see are the large four-inch gun mounted on a raised platform near the bow, the iron propeller (no salvage value..) and rudder together with the twin depth charge racks on the main deck.

Almost 1,300 aircraft were lost during the Solomons campaign, and the Florida Islands has some great examples from both sides – starting with the Catalina wreck.

The Consolidated Aircraft Model 28 was a much-loved aircraft in World War Two. Commonly known as the PBY Catalina, it was robust, reliable and multi-functional – serving equally well as a maritime patrol, bomber, or search and rescue, seaplane. It was the latter role that endeared it to many as Catalinas saved the lives of numerous pilots and crew during the conflict.

The Catalina wreck is just off the southeast tip of Tulagi and is believed to have struck a small boat while landing at night in November 1943, after retrieving a downed airman.

Flipped onto its back by the impact, the crew and rescued pilot managed to escape the damaged aircraft before it sank – righting itself on descent and coming to rest with the nose in 26m and tailplane in 34m. As the wreck was found after the salvage era, it has all three machine guns plus several boxes of ammunition scattered around the wreck.

Main gun on the Moa bow



Wreck Week

The Masters Wreck Week commences on Saturday afternoon with boarding the Solomon Master in Honiara, followed by an evening journey west to the Russell Islands. The boat then heads east to the Florida Islands to dive that region before returning to Guadalcanal for the last days of the trip. Departure is on Monday morning with both the boarding and departure days aligned with domestic and international flights in and out of Honiara. www.masterliveboards.com

Diver inspecting the flight controls on the B17 Bessie Wreck



The Kawanishi H6K flying boat was the Japanese equivalent of the Catalina, but bigger, with four engines instead of two and much longer range.

Nicknamed Mavis, on the day the Allies invaded Tulagi there were seven H6Ks plus eight Rufes (amphibious Mitsubishi Zeros) moored at Gavutu and Tanambogo Islands, near Tulagi. A surprise dawn air raid by F4F Wildcats destroyed all 15 aircraft.

The eight Rufes were later recovered for intelligence purposes and of the seven Mavis, only four remain in any recognizable form. Of those, Mavis 5 and 6 are the most intact and are both good dives with lots to see.

Guadalcanal

Control of the large airfield near Honiara was the key to success in the Guadalcanal campaign and Japan made several attempts to retake the area. ▶

White Beach



“ Four P38 Lightnings were dispatched to down Yamamoto’s aircraft and his death became a pivotal point in the Pacific war ”

Three major land battles, seven large naval battles and almost daily aerial battles were fought in late-1942, culminating in the decisive Battle of Guadalcanal. In December, the Japanese abandoned efforts to retake Guadalcanal and evacuated their remaining forces.

First launched in 1924 the I-1 submarine returned to service with the 6th fleet in November 1941, arriving in the Solomons in January 1942 as part of resupply efforts the Allies called the Tokyo Express.

So it was that the I-1 crossed paths with the Moa and Kiwi. In a pitched battle the New Zealanders won when the Kiwi rammed the submarine three times, forcing the I-1 to run herself aground.

Sixty-six crew survived and when evacuated to Rabaul, their debriefing concluded that the sub’s code books were still on board and two attempts were made to destroy the sub, the first with depth charges from a Japanese destroyer, and then by air raid.

But US Army officers had already found the code books, enabling the decoding of messages indicating Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the architect of the Japanese battle plans, would conduct an inspection of an airfield on Bougainville.

Four P38 Lightnings were dispatched to down Yamamoto’s aircraft and his death became a pivotal point in the Pacific war. The attempts to destroy the I-1, and the damage done salvaging its high-quality metals, mean that parts of it are no longer recognizable. But others are and, at almost 100 metres in length, it’s a fascinating dive!

Traditional dancers at the Florida Islands



In Summary

If you like World War Two wrecks, then a Wreck Week trip is a must-do, as the number and variety of recreational diving sites is hard to beat - I have only written about less than half of those I dived!

PNG also has a variety of World War Two wrecks, but the closest thing to the Solomons trip would be Kavieng’s aircraft wrecks, while Truk Lagoon has even more wrecks, but it’s much harder to get to...

Personally, I loved the trip and the exposure to a critical part of the Pacific war and I am now looking to dive those deeper wrecks using my recently acquired tech diving skills! ■

Divers ready at the I1 Submarine site



Don Silcock

Don is Scuba Diver’s Senior Travel Editor and is based on Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and ‘big animal’ experiences globally.

www.indopacificimages.com