



SOLOMON ISLANDS



UNDERWATER WAR STORIES

From the air, the Solomon Islands archipelago looks like a tropical island paradise - and it is. But just over 70 years ago, this was the scene of WWII's most prolonged military campaign in the Pacific theatre.

Up close, the remnants and memories of that bloody war are still etched deeply into the landscape of this beautiful country, above and below water, and it makes for fascinating holiday exploration.

The Solomon Islands campaign ran for more than six months with heavy casualties on both sides; the Allies suffering more than 7,000 deaths, the Japanese more than 20,000, along with 60-plus ships and 1,200 aircraft.

In fact, there are so many warships at the bottom of the narrow strait that separates the island of Guadalcanal, where the nation's capital Honiara is located, from the Savo and Florida Islands, that its name was changed from Savo Sound to Iron Bottom Sound. On land, the jungles are still littered with the wrecks of aircraft, artillery and vehicles.

People travel from all over the world to dive the islands' wrecks, now providing shelter to colourful reef fish; to sift through the collections of WWII memorabilia; and to listen to WWII stories, as told by the locals, sometimes with a few embellishments.

Here are just a few Solomon Islands war stories.

The Bonegis, Guadalcanal

Now commonly known as Bonegi 1 and Bonegi 2, or even B1 and B2 (like the Bananas in Pyjamas!), these two Japanese wrecks, both transport vessels, are a short wade into the water on two adjacent beaches a short drive west of Honiara.

The Hirokawa Maru and the Kinugawa Maru were two of a total 11 Japanese transports that were attacked on their way to Guadalcanal on November 14, 1942, bombarded from land and sea. The 156-metre-long wreck was originally stranded upright ashore, but over time, weathering various storms and the odd earthquake, the ship shifted and now lies with the remains of her bow in about five metres of water and her stern 60 metres under the surface, covered in hard and soft corals and literally teeming with life. ♦

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Japanese submarine, Guadalcanal.



I-1 Japanese submarine, Guadalcanal

Royal New Zealand Navy corvettes HMNZS Moa and Kiwi sank this enormous submarine, almost 100 metres long, in January 1942. The Kiwis dropped depth charges, which brought the sub to the surface, and a battle between the three ships then ensued, during which the Kiwi rammed the I-1 three times. The I-1 eventually ran aground on the reef near the village of Tambea, where it remains. It's in such shallow water you can snorkel parts of it.

Vilu War Museum, Guadalcanal

A few kilometres west of Honiara, this unassuming little outdoor museum has an impressive collection of wrecks and wartime memorabilia including American and Japanese planes and heavy artillery, neatly arranged in a beautifully landscaped garden. When you arrive, a shout-out will summon the caretaker-curator, who'll tell you the stories behind all the mangled machinery in his garden, where they were found and their significance in the battle scene.

“He found a WWII Jeep rusting in the jungle and lovingly restored it to working order”



The Catalina and the Wildcat, Tulagi Island

This American Catalina sank rather unceremoniously in 1943 after hitting a small boat on the surface and now sits in 35 metres of water near Tulagi Island. The wreck was discovered just three years ago by the NZ Navy, so she's more or less intact, unlike other wrecks that have been pillaged over the years since the war ended.

Another recent discovery here (also by the Kiwis), is the wreck of a Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat, dubbed the Gavutu Wildcat, which is believed to be the aircraft of 1st Lt James E. Swett, one of the US Marine Corps' most decorated pilots.



Vilu War Museum, Guadalcanal.



Starboard engine mount from the rear at Catalina Wreck, Tulagi.



Alfie at Alfie's Jeep, Munda.



Sunrise over Kolombangara Island at Fatboys Resort, Gizo.



The circumstances of the ditching are remarkable in themselves. On April 7, 1943, a massive Japanese air raid took place on US shipping, on by-then recaptured Guadalcanal and Tulagi. This was 22-year-old Swett's first day of service and during the torrid 15-minute air battle, Swett shot down seven attacking planes, making him an 'ace' and Medal of Honor recipient on day one. Swett reckons he got eight.

His ammunition expended and his plane shot up, Swett was forced to ditch but was rescued, recuperated and returned to service, surviving the war and passing away at the ripe old age of 88 in 2009, or so the story goes.

Peter Joseph WWII Museum, Munda

The curator of this WWII museum, Barney Poulson, has been collecting memorabilia since 2002. The museum is named after his first find, dog tags belonging to one Corporal Peter Joseph. In fact there are piles of dog tags here, sitting among neatly ordered stacks of hand grenades, guns, bullets, Coke bottles and mess kits.

The Dauntless, Munda

The wreck of the Douglas SBD Dauntless sits on a sandy bottom in the shallow waters of Rendova Lagoon near Munda. It's covered with soft and hard corals, and an abundance of marine life. According to legend, or rather, according to our dive guide, the American pilot and the Japanese fighter who shot him down were reunited here on a dive – by sheer coincidence – and have remained in touch ever since.

Alfie's Jeep, Munda

Munda, much like the rest of the Solomons, is full of characters and Alfie is a great example. Alfie Rex Lay found a WWII Jeep rusting in the jungle and has lovingly restored it to working order, using parts also salvaged from the jungle. If you're lucky, he'll take you for a ride in it.

The Hellcat, Gizo

Gizo's F6F Hellcat was named 'Betsy' after the pilot's wife. It was ditched in January 1943, after being shot by a Japanese fighter pilot, in very ◉

shallow water off the coast of Kolombangara Island in Gizo. It now lies in less than nine metres of water and is covered in soft and hard corals.

JFK's misadventures at Kennedy Island, Gizo

While the correct name for this island positioned between popular dive resort Fatboys and the rather imposing Kolombangara Island is Kasolo, locals call it Plum Pudding Island and most Western visitors know it as Kennedy Island, after its brush with US presidential fame.

During WWII, torpedo boat PT-109, captained by John F. Kennedy, who went on to become US President, was rammed and wrecked here by Japanese destroyer Amagiri in August 1943.

Kennedy and his crew were rescued when Australian coast-watcher Arthur Reginald Evans, who manned a secret observation post at the top of Kolombangara Island's Mount Veve volcano, spotted the explosion and sent a rescue party. One of the rescuers, a local called Eroni Kumana, has erected a small shrine to Kennedy, which still stands.

Today it's a pretty spot for a picnic, surrounded by a beautiful coral reef.

The Toa Maru, Gizo

This massive wreck of a Japanese freighter is more than 140 metres long and lies just 100 metres offshore, near Gizo Island. It's one of the largest and most impressive wrecks in the Solomon Islands. Some of its cargo still remains, including sake bottles, vials of medicine and a jar of condoms! **[0]**



Guns in the jungle, Munda.



Diver above the engine at Hellcat Wreck, Gizo.

WHERE TO STAY

Honiara

The Heritage Park Hotel has well-appointed rooms, a great pool and one of the best restaurants in town. The Solomon Kitano Mendana Hotel has a pool, a café-bar and two restaurants.

Munda

Agnes Gateway Hotel (Agnes Lodge) has 16 well-appointed bungalows, half a dozen single rooms and some dormitories. It's a two-minute walk from the airport (as is most of the town) and you'll find Munda Dive on the grounds of the resort.

Gizo

Fatboys Resort is located on Mbabanga Island, an eight-minute boat ride from Gizo's main town and airport. The resort is made up of 12 or so bungalows, all with stunning views of Kolombangara and Kennedy islands.

About DivePlanIt

DivePlanIt is a dive travel website created by avid divers and ocean advocates Deborah Dickson-Smith and Simon Mallender. It's their aim to inspire more people to explore and learn to love the underwater world that surrounds us. The site includes detailed information about the best diving destinations around Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

The recently launched DivePlanIt app is a not just a dive-logging app; it's a social media platform for anyone who loves exploring the underwater world and sharing those experiences with friends. You can log your dive with up to 10 photos and share them in DivePlanIt's Scubafeed; share to Facebook, Twitter or Google+; or just post a picture.

Use the app to record where you've been diving and snorkelling, search for new places to dive or identify that fish you just found, with the built-in directories Dive Sites, Dive Centres and Fish ID, respectively. ***Diveplanit.com***

