

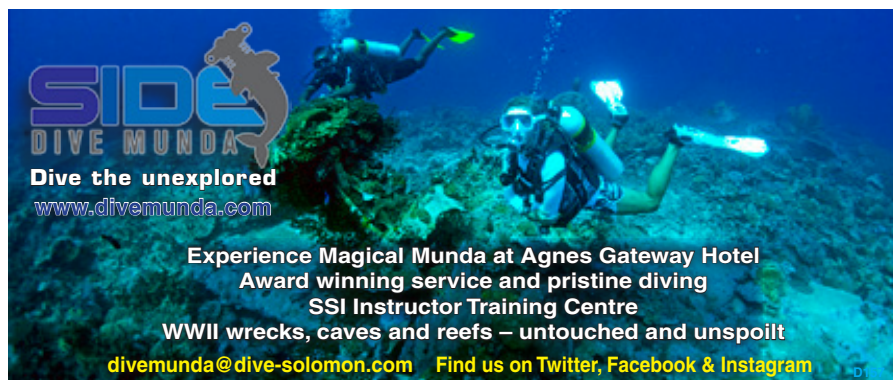
# Diving WWII wrecks in the Solomon Islands

By Andrew Trahair

(Images by author unless otherwise credited)



2017 will mark the 75th anniversary of the WWII battle for Guadalcanal where the advance of the Japanese imperial forces across the Pacific was halted by the US. Much has been written and filmed about the fierce fighting that took place there and elsewhere in the Solomon Islands; fierce naval battles between the islands, hundreds of aeroplanes duelling in the air. Tens of thousands of young men stormed the beaches, stalked the jungles, fighting hand to hand to defend and defeat strategic positions.

An underwater photograph showing two divers exploring a wreck on the seabed. The divers are equipped with scuba gear, including tanks and fins. The wreck appears to be a large, dark structure, possibly a ship or a large container, partially covered in coral and marine life. The water is clear, and the scene is illuminated by the divers' lights.

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## SOLOMONS GUADALCANAL



The Solomon Islands is just three hours' flight from Australia with a wealth of historic relics from this period to explore and experience first-hand. Many lie submerged beneath clear tropical South Pacific waters, and several dive operators specialise in taking WWII history enthusiasts to these dive sites.

### Tulagi Dive, Honiara

Tulagi Dive in Honiara, Guadalcanal, which offers technical diving facilities and gas mixes, takes divers to two Japanese transport ships sunk near the beaches at Mbonegi. These are fascinating, and easily accessible from the shore for snorkellers and divers.

One vessel still has trucks and a bulldozer lying in the hold and anti-aircraft guns bolted to the decks. Another shore dive is

the I-1 Submarine lying in 3–28m, still quite intact despite having been salvaged over the years.

Advanced divers can descend to the USS

*Aaron Ward* resting upright in 60 metres of water at 'Iron Bottom Sound', named for the many wrecks in the area. The *Aaron Ward* was a US Navy destroyer sunk on 7th April 1943 and as you approach she emerges from

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The USS Aaron Ward was only discovered in 1995 Photo: David Kirkland

the deep blue where visibility is around 20–30 metres. She was only discovered in 1995, long after the era of opportunistic salvage crews swept through the Solomons in the 1960s and '70s taking anything of value and interest they could remove.

*... The Aaron Ward was discovered long after the era of opportunistic salvage crews swept through, taking anything of value and interest they could...*

I was struck by the large numbers of tropical fish that make the *Aaron Ward* their home. An astounding variety of marine life shelters in the rusting and twisted nooks and crannies of these steel decks, and they thrive. Schools of giant trevally swirl nearby, and I was surprised by the big volumes of hard and soft corals growing at this depth. The *Aaron Ward* really is a premier wreck dive in a corner of the Pacific littered with wrecks.

#### Raiders Hotel, Tulagi

Raiders Hotel and Dive is a boutique dive operation at Tulagi Island taking WWII history enthusiasts to many of the area's sunken relics. Divers can visit the Japanese 'Mavis' sea plane, a large reconnaissance aeroplane bombed by the Americans on the morning of the 7th August, 1943 when the 'Marine Raiders' stormed the beaches of Tulagi. Nearby divers can explore a US Catalina aeroplane and wildcat fighter, the USS *Kanawha*, a US oiler sunk in 35–60m, and the New Zealand minesweeper RNZN *Moa* in around 40m.

At the Ghavutu Wharf dump site divers can explore the refuse of the Japanese war machine. Discarded battle-damaged aero-

plane parts and other twisted wreckage lies beside discarded sake bottles. Nearby was where the bow of the USS *New Orleans* was removed after extensive repairs were carried out in Tulagi Harbour.

#### SIDE MV Taka Liveaboard

Dive liveaboard MV *Taka* sails from Honiara taking WWII history enthusiasts to many of Guadalcanal and Tulagi sites as well as to remote and less accessible places around the Solomon Islands.

Amongst them the *Taka* visits the Florida Islands and the White Beach dump site in the Russel Islands, a former PT base used by the US Navy. A few wooden pillars along the shore are all that remain above the surface but below lies an abundance of discarded military hardware: trucks and jeeps, sunken pontoons, and assorted jetsam. An astounding variety of marine life has made this their home. Anemone fish bob about; archer fish and cardinal fish thrive in the roots of the mangroves flourishing along the shoreline; mandarin fish emerge to perform their mating dance at dusk.

In Wickham Harbour near Morovo Lagoon, several Japanese shipwrecks rest in gloomy and haunting waters at 28m depth. Several are yet to be identified by WWII historians since the record of Japanese losses were not always well documented.

*... Discarded battle-damaged aeroplane parts and other twisted wreckage lies beside discarded sake bottles...*

#### Dive Munda, Western Province

Visitors to Munda can dive on aeroplanes shot down during the fierce battle that took place over the Munda airstrip. Two lie at the bottom of Rendova Harbour where a young lieutenant, John F Kennedy, and his PT109 boat were based. A US Airacobra fighter plane, only recently discovered by 'bêche-de-mer' fishermen, lies in 27m. Nearby a Douglas Dauntless dive bomber rests in 11m, the subject of a documentary when its elderly pilot, Jim Dougherty, returned there to dive on it 50 years after he was shot down (see *Lost Warriors of the South Pacific*). A US Corsair fighter lies on pristine

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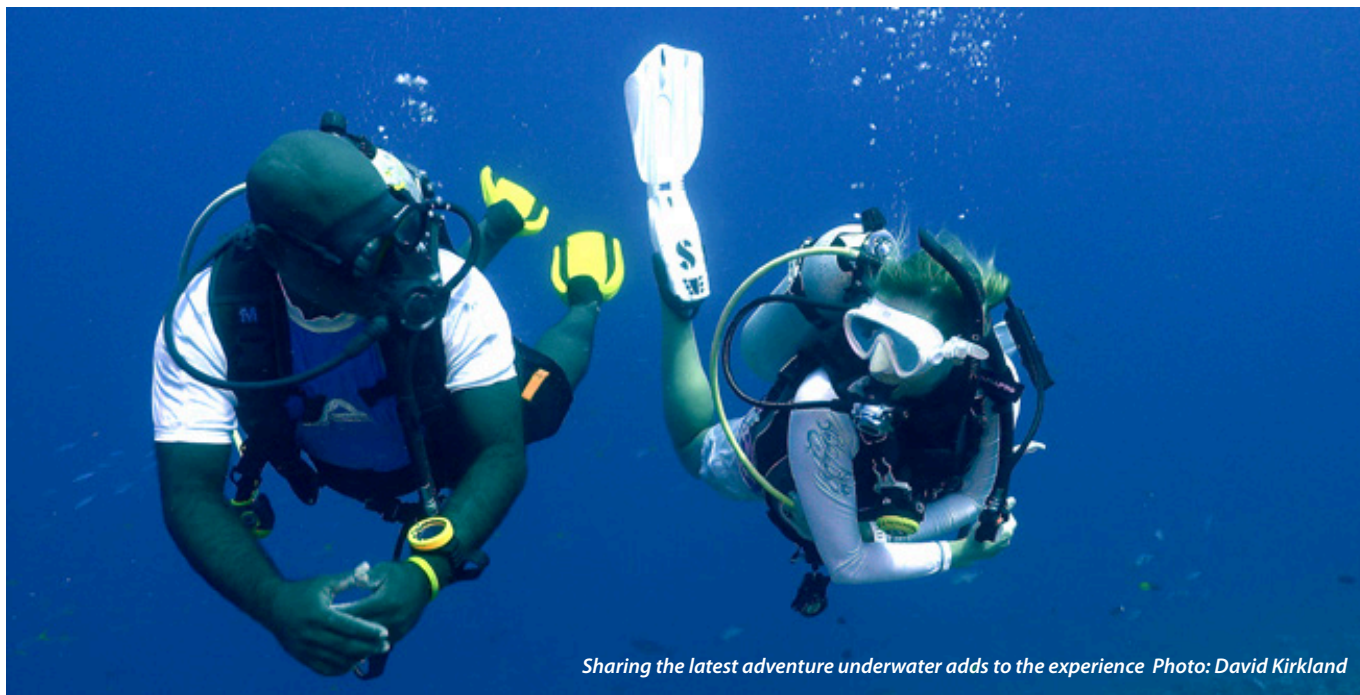
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Sharing the latest adventure underwater adds to the experience Photo: David Kirkland

sand at 51m almost completely intact and now home to giant grouper and Napoleon wrasse.

*...below lies an abundance of discarded military hardware: trucks and jeeps, sunken pontoons, and assorted jetsam...*

At Mboroko Harbour the *Kashi Maru* transport ship was unloading supplies for Japanese troops garrisoned nearby when a direct hit from a US bomber blew it up. Scuba divers, freedivers and snorkellers can explore the wreck lying in the shallows a few metres off the beach. The shattered chassis of trucks and jeeps are scattered about its hold; fuel drums and unexploded ordinance litter the area. Nearby a US Wildcat fighter rests in 14m on a spectacular coral garden of giant

plate corals hundreds of years old. These unique opportunities for exploring the relics of the WWII Pacific campaign in the Solomon Islands await divers of all level of capability and confidence. But what they often find is unexpected, as their visit to these tangible reminders of an important time in modern history proves to be a moving as well as an exciting experience, preserved beneath the warm, crystal waters of the South Pacific.

#### Contact:

Tulagi Dive, Honiara  
Raiders Hotel and Dive, Tulagi  
MV Taka Liveboard cruises, Solomon  
Island Dive Expeditions (SIDE)  
Dive Munda (SIDE)

Andrew Trahair is a dive professional at Dive Munda



#### INFO-SNIPPET

**Location:** North-east of Australia

**Temperature:** 28–32°C

**Water temperature:** 28–30°C

**Language:** English and Pidgin English

**Currency:** Solomon Dollar

Five airlines currently provide regular scheduled services into Honiara. Solomon Airlines, Virgin Australia, Fiji Airways (formerly Air Pacific), Air Niugini and Air Vanuatu all provide international flights to the Solomons. Honiara International Airport on the island of Guadalcanal is the only international airport in the Solomon Islands and the main port of arrival.

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