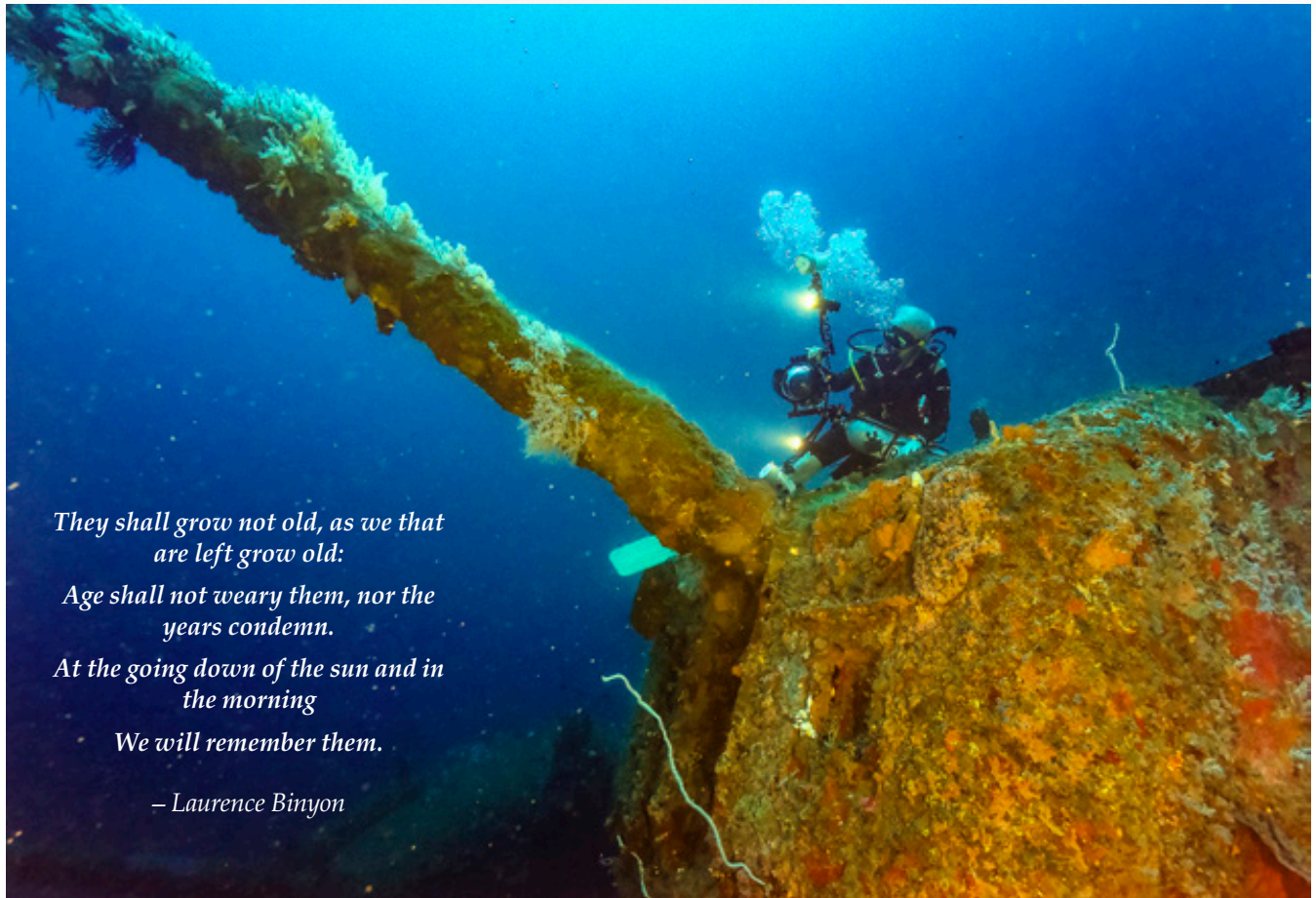


The TRAGEDY of WAR

Rusting Remains Shelter New Life

By Dave Moran.

Images by Dave Moran or as credited.



*They shall grow not old, as we that
are left grow old:*

*Age shall not weary them, nor the
years condemn.*

*At the going down of the sun and in
the morning*

We will remember them.

— Laurence Binyon

*Dave Moran inspecting one of the Aaron Ward's
5 inch, 38 calibre Bofors guns mounted on the
bow. Image: Mike Scotland*

Approximately 42,000 Japanese and 8,000 Americans and hundreds of New Zealand, Australian and Solomon Islanders lost their lives, on land, in the air and on the sea in battles for military control throughout the Solomon Islands 1942–1945.

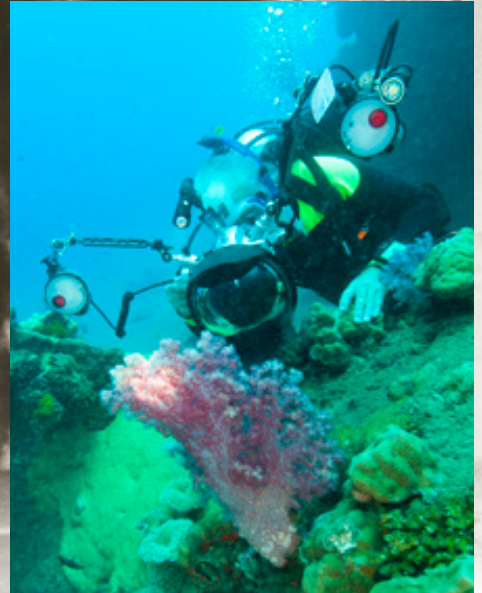
I find it hard to block out from my mind the carnage that happened so many years ago as

I follow Neil Yates down past the shattered, crumbling masses of twisted sheets of steel plates and life boat davits hanging empty as they desperately stretch their rusting arms towards the sunlight above. You could almost feel the soul of the ship crying out to be returned to the world of air and sunshine above.

SOLOMAN ISLANDS



Neil Yates, owner of Tulagi Dive, inspecting the cockpit of the Japanese flying boat, a Kawanishi H6K, also known as a Mavis. Image: Mike Scotland.



Mike Scotland enjoys the photographic opportunities on Bonegi 2, Honiara.

At 40 metres the sun's life-giving energy was fading, as was the vibrant colours of the hanging soft corals. My twin 5,000 lumen LED lights brought back the sunshine!

Neil stopped at 55 metres, hovering beside our goal, one of the stern's anti-aircraft guns defiantly pointing skywards as if it just needed a finger on the trigger and it would burst into life. The visibility was a little dusty but the diver's strobes pumped new life into the darkness. For an

...life boat davits hanging empty as they desperately stretch their rusting arms towards the sunlight above...

instant I thought the gun's spirit had survived its watery grave. After 74 years, Bonegi 1 (*Hirokawa Maru* a Japanese cargo/transport ship, length 145m) still has a spirit that tickled the back of my neck as I explored her welcoming, but solemn, cluttered cargo hulls.

This was my first dive with Neil, the owner of Tulagi Dive, which is based beside the yacht club in Honiara, Solomon Islands' capital city. I was on a five-day trip to experience some of the diving possibilities that would be available to divers if they attended a proposed diving festival in October 2017 being hosted by Solomon Island Visitors Bureau and various dive operators.

Neil's operation offers a huge choice of dive sites. From the wrecks, "just down the road" such as Bonegi 1 and 2 (*Kinugawa Maru*) and the Japanese I-1 submarine in 3–28 metres, to sites scattered around the islands that surround Iron Bottom Sound – also known as the Slot. During the Battle of Guadalcanal (August 1942 – February 1943), fierce naval and air battles shattered the island's tranquil environment as the Americans and their allies fought and finally stopped Japan's relentless advancement towards Australia.

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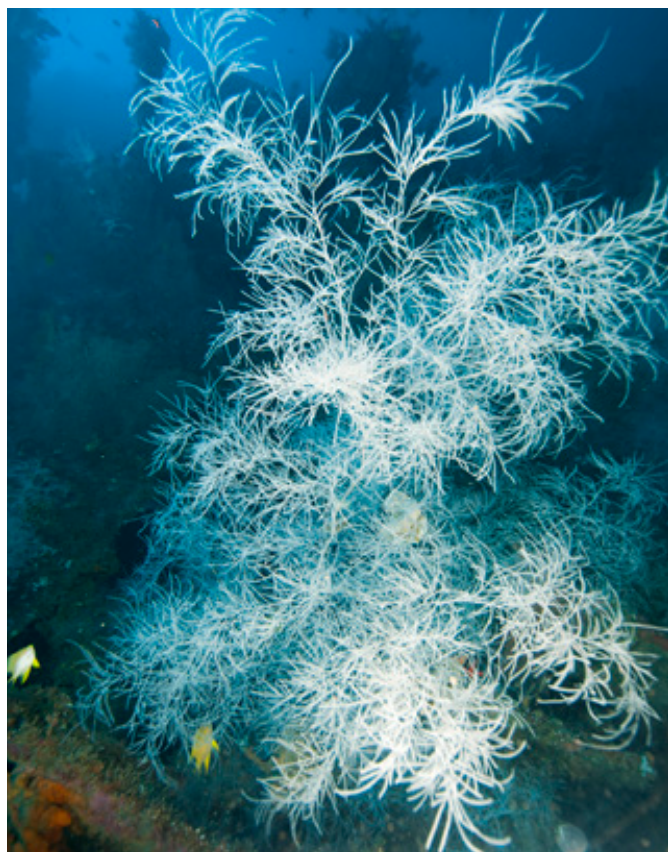
For many New Zealand divers a must-do dive is the HMNZS *Moa*, which is just a stone's throw away from the relaxing deck of Raiders Hotel and Dive; a wonderfully appointed boutique accommodation and dive operation managed by New Zealanders Bob and Yvie, based on the island of Tulagi. The *Moa* rests in 36–42 metres, even though the visibility can sometimes be marginal, it's a most memorable dive – her bow gun still holds firm on her bow deck as if still desperately challenging the enemy as three bombs broke her back. An inquisitive grouper breathes life back into her broken hull.



Belinda Botha from Dive Munda within Bonegi 2.



Neil Yates, owner of Tulagi Dive, leading the way – Bonegi 2.



Black coral – Bonegi 1.

Numerous WWII wrecks are a short boat ride from Raiders. Check out the huge Japanese flying boat, Kawanish H6K, which the Americans nicknamed Mavis with its 40 metre wing span!

If you mention the USS *Aaron Ward*, divers' eyes light up and a slightly worried frown washes their forehead. The 106-metre-long hull rests in 70 metres with her deck at 60 metres. New Zealander Ewan Stevenson discovered her in 1995. No salvage divers have extracted her nonferrous metals so she is intact – well, apart from the massive damage caused by Japanese VAL dive bombers on the 7th April 1943; the same raid sunk the *Moa* and USS *Kanawha*. Neil plans this dive on the *Ward* so that qualified divers have maximum safe procedures in place.

...mention the USS Aaron Ward, divers' eyes light up and a slightly worried frown washes their forehead...

We were diving open-circuit scuba. Neil provided a back-up cylinder that each diver clipped onto their BC. A four-rung decompression station was hanging at the surface with two cylinders of 21 Nitrox to add an extra safety factor to the divers' decompression schedules.

The wreck sits virtually upright on the sandy bottom, covered in marine life with stunning black coral trees hanging from her gunnels! With only 15 minutes on the wreck time goes fast. The bridge has collapsed in recent years but the twin five inch, 38 calibre dual purpose guns mounted on the bow still proudly search the sky above in a vain attempt to knock out the elusive dive bomb-

ers. Reaching these guns is all that is really possible on your first dive on the *Ward*. A couple more of these impressive guns are mounted on the stern. Using a rebreather would allow a more 'relaxed' exploration dive, which many divers have done.

Diving in the Solomon Islands offers so much. An extraordinary WWII history, abundant fish life and soft coral gardens that remind you that life does

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Andrew Trahair from Dive Munda
inspects one of the anti-aircraft guns on the aft deck of Bonegi 1, Honiara.



Raiders Hotel and Dive, Tulagi.

continues even after all seems to be lost. Yes, when you dive the Solomons you always have in the back of your mind: *We will remember them.*

Dive Festival 2017

The planning of the Dive Festival in early October 2017 is currently in the planning stage as we go to press. The main 'base' will be either in Honoria or on the island of Munda in the Western Province, or a combination of both. Divers will have the flexibility to arrange their schedules so that they will have opportunities to experience diving with Tulagi Dive, Raiders Hotel and Dive, Dive Gizo and Dive Munda. Other dive operators may also become involved such as UEPI Island Resort. Liveaboard options will most likely be available on board MV *Taka* and *Bilikiki* Cruises. 

The Solomon Island Visitors Bureau will be releasing further information in press releases and via their Facebook page: www.facebook.com/VisitSolomonIslands/



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WWII Memorials in Honiara:
American & Japanese.

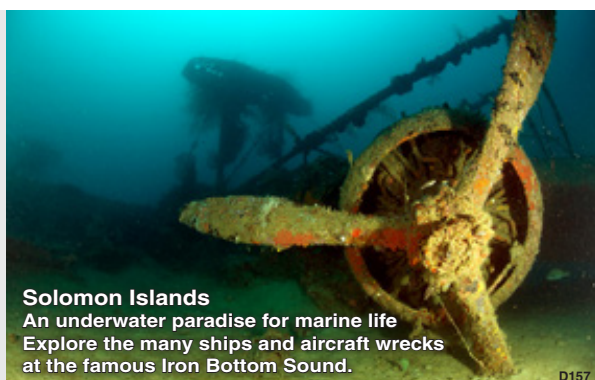


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