

# THE BATTLES OF PARADISE

The Battle of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, marked a turning point in WWII. This year marks the 75th Anniversary of that decisive combat. Planning is well underway for special commemorations, involving representatives of all participating countries, discovers **Kathy Omler**

**R**eefs, lagoons and jungle; blues and greens and aquas - the beauty of the Solomon Islands today belies its bloody WWII past, when six months of battle turned the tide of the Pacific Campaign. The Battle of Guadalcanal stopped the Japanese advance. It also left tens of thousands dead; Solomon Islanders, Japanese, Americans, Australians, New Zealanders and British, a good many of them from malaria and starvation as well as from warfare.

The significance of this battle was huge, and remains so in the Solomon Islands. War history and wreck-diving have become major tourism drawcards. August 7, the day the battle began, has become an important day of commemoration, not just for veterans, their descendants, and the leaders of the governments who fought, but also for all Solomon Islanders.

This year's event, the 75th Anniversary, is expected to be huge and spearheading the commemoration planning is Sir Bruce Saunders, chairman of the Solomon Scouts and Coastwatchers Trust Board. He is working in liaison with the United States Embassy and Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau. A dawn service, on August 7 at the United States War Memorial in Honiara, is expected to be attended by governor generals and government leaders from all countries involved in the battle. Ships from the United States, New Zealand and Australian navies will be in port for wreath laying ceremonies planned over the wrecks of warships lying off the coast of Guadalcanal.

Planning for the event also includes establishing a new national park on Bloody Ridge, site of a decisive battle during Operation Watchtower, the fight for Guadalcanal, with a dedication service planned for 4pm on August 7, the exact time the battle began in 1942.

War history plays a significant, year-round role for tourism in the Solomon Islands. There is huge



appeal for divers, who come to explore hundreds of sunken planes, ships and submarines, while local tour companies host specialist war history tours, visiting war monuments, museums of war relics and open fields where the hulls of landing craft sit rusting. They also tell war stories, embedded now in island folklore.

These are stories of heroism; of locals who risked their lives to save ship-wrecked and wounded allies; and of the Coastwatchers who were hunted with dogs by the Japanese as they hid on jungle-covered high points and radioed in enemy positions, thwarting many attacks. There are also stories of battles in 'The Slot', the narrow but oh-so-beautiful passage between the main groups of islands that trapped naval boats like sitting ducks, the big guns and bomber planes a vision at odds with the stunning beauty of the lagoons, reefs, sandspits and islands.

Near Gizo, in the Western Province, is Kennedy Island, where a certain young US naval lieutenant swam to safety, towing a wounded crewmate, after his PT109 torpedo boat, on night patrol, was rammed and sunk. Kennedy and his surviving crew were rescued by two locals. He scratched a message on a coconut shell for them to take to American command, conveying his location. That shell later became his paperweight in his US Presidential office.