

WRECK



DURING WORLD WAR 2 SOME OF THE FIERCEST FIGHTING IN THE PACIFIC WAS IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS. THIS ARCHIPELAGO IS LOCATED EAST OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND IS JUST OVER 2,000 KILOMETRES NORTHEAST OF BRISBANE. THE JAPANESE HAD TAKEN OVER ALL OF THE SOLOMONS IN APRIL 1942 AND STARTED CONSTRUCTING AN AIRFIELD ON GUADALCANAL.

MICHAEL McFADYEN © 2015
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From top left:

These skylights give access to the *Kanawha's* engine room

Some of the most colourful marine growth of all is on the *Kyushu Maru*

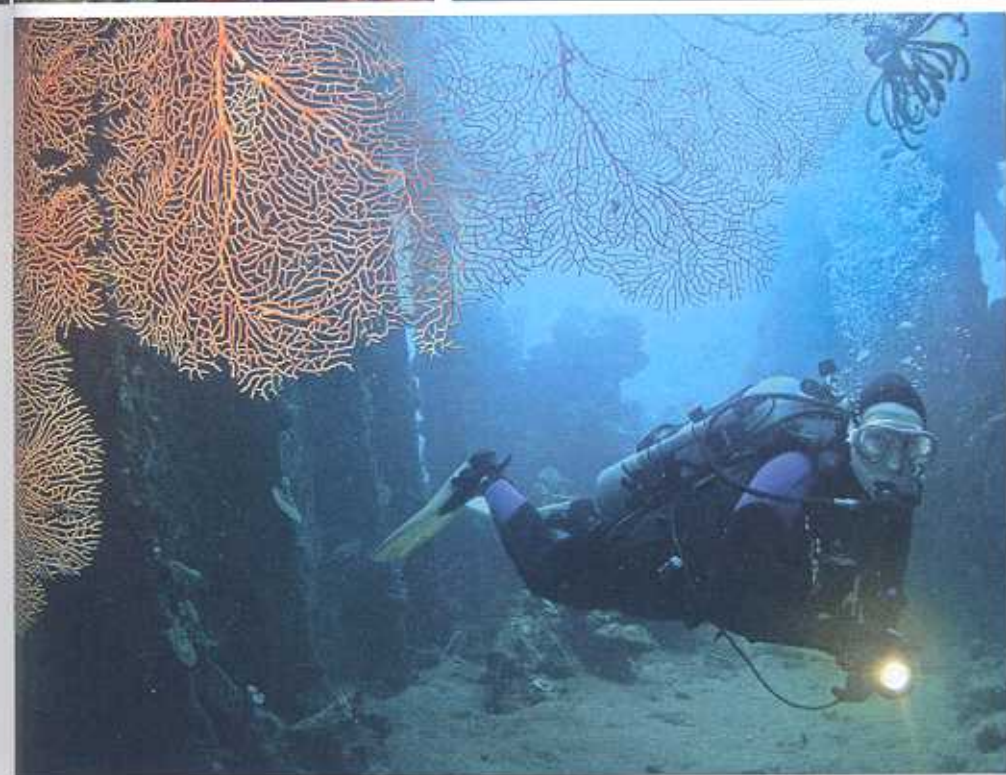
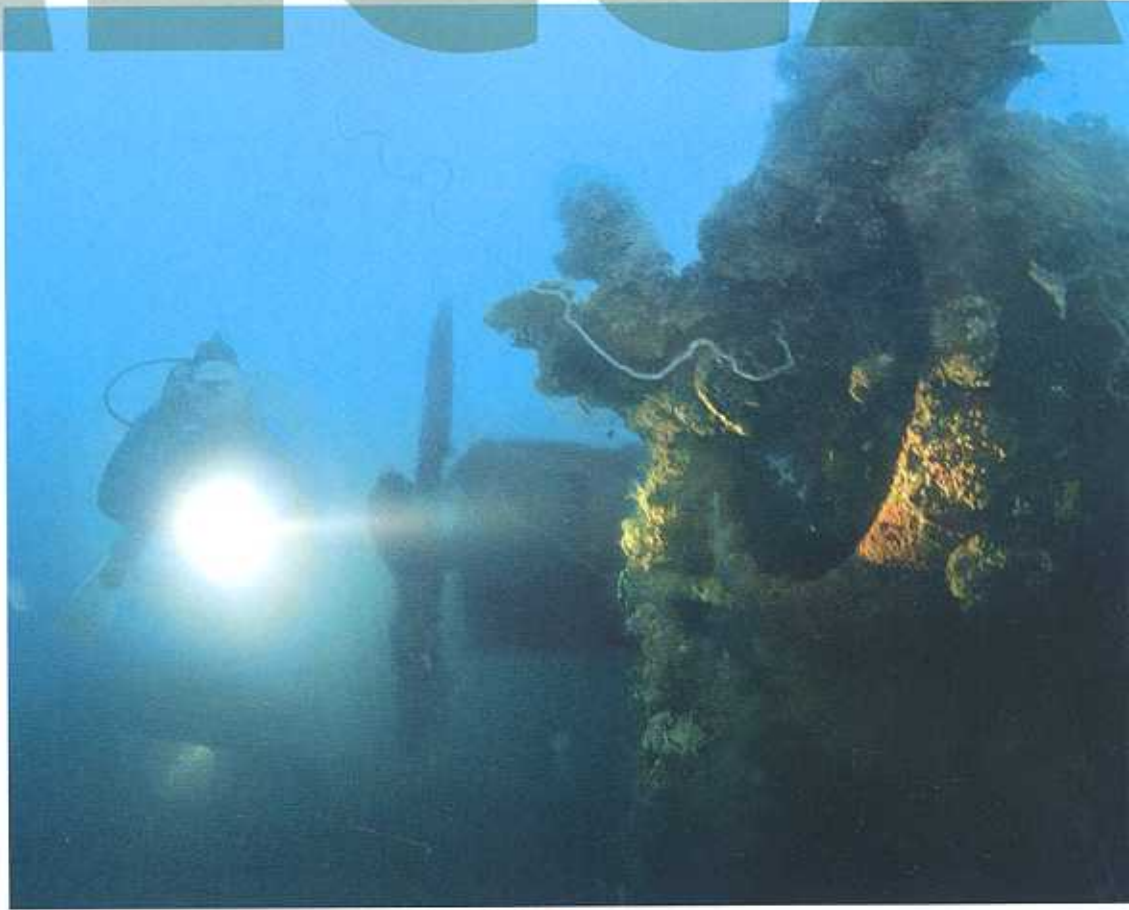
The outer port engine of one of the *Mavis* seaplanes

The *Hirokawa Maru* is covered in gorgonias

When completed, this would give them the ability to bomb Australia using land based aircraft and support their push further south into the New Hebrides. In August of the same year, US Marines, supported by US, Australian and New Zealand warships, landed on Guadalcanal and nearby islands to begin a ferocious fight that would last for most of the next year. Even once they held the area, Japanese planes and ships made attacks into the area in a vain attempt to regain the islands.

During these battles, so many ships were sunk off what is now the capital, Honiara, that it was nicknamed 'Iron Bottom Sound'. Many of these are in waters that are too deep for recreational diving (and even technical diving). However, there are still numerous Japanese, American and New Zealand ships that can be dived.

MECCA



Today the diving is mostly centred on Honiara, although some outlying islands also have dive operations. Within a short drive of Honiara there's at least three Japanese wrecks and a US bomber that can be dived from shore. There's also a fantastic US armed freighter that can be dived by boat. About 42 kilometres across Iron Bottom Sound is Tulagi where there are even more wrecks and aircraft.

JAPANESE WRECKS

Hirokawa Maru

Also known as *Bonegi 1*, it's located at Bonegi Beach to the west of Honiara. On 15 November 1942 it was attacked by US fighters from Henderson Airfield and the USS *Enterprise*. The captain ran her aground on the beach in an attempt to save her cargo. Later, she slipped off the beach into deeper water. Today she rests in water from five to 55 metres. The



bow section is very broken up, but the coral growth makes up for this damage. In fact, the shallower wrecks present the opportunity to dive not only a wreck, but a reef, as the growth is amazing. At 55 metres you can see the stern of the ship including the prop shaft. Working your way back along the wreck you can explore inside the holds and crew areas. There is still a little bit of cargo to see, including drums and equipment.

Kinugawa Maru

This wreck is also known as *Bonegi 2*. It is similar in size to the *Hirokawa Maru*, about 7,000 tons. She's normally dived as a second dive as the stern is only in 28 metres. Once again the prop shaft and rudder are the main attractions, but there are some holds to explore as well. As you come back along the wreck you will see there's a lot more damage to the hull and it's in nowhere as good condition as the nearby wreck. However

there's still a lot to see, including a truck in one of the holds and the huge engine. The shallowest part of the wreck also has great coral and fishlife.

Kyusyu Maru

The last of the trio of Japanese freighters near Honiara, it's also known as the *Ruiniu* as it's near the Ruiniu River. This ship was a little larger than the other two and was sunk exactly a month before they were. At 45 metres you can see the twin prop shafts of the ship. The props were salvaged in 1969 by Brian Bailey, as were a lot of the props on other wrecks around here. The rear holds have been damaged by fire, but you can still find things like china, cattle bones, rifle rounds and even biscuits. Further along you can see the main engine of the ship (which appears to have powered both props) and a smaller auxiliary engine. In another hold you can see artillery shells.

Submarine I-1

This huge 2,135 ton submarine, almost 100 metres long, is located at Tambea at the northwestern end of Guadalcanal. She was sunk on the night of 29 January 1943 by HMNZS *Kiwi* and HMNZS *Moa*. The wreck runs from five to 30 metres, with the shallower bow section extremely damaged. This damage was mostly caused by a salvage attempt by Wallin Gibbins and Cyril Ashton in 1968 when their 'controlled' explosion ignited the remaining torpedoes. The stern section is still in fairly good condition, with the counter rotating props, dive planes, cutter and rudder still visible. When I dived her a long while back, you could still enter the hull and see things like the electric motors.

ALLIED WRECKS

USS John Penn

This was originally built as the SS *Excambian*, a 9,360 ton 135 metre long

WRECKS



passenger liner. On Friday 13 August 1943 she was located off Henderson Field (the Japanese air base captured by the US) when Japanese torpedo bombers from Bougainville attacked. One torpedo hit and the ship sank within 30 minutes. Today the ship is located in 60 metres, with the port hull in about 36 metres. This is a deep dive, with strong currents. Things to see include a Jeep and the remains of a Japanese aircraft that crashed into the ship during the attack.

USS Kanawha

This was the first oil tanker owned by the US Navy. She was 14,500 tons and 137 metres long. On the afternoon of 7 April 1943 she was motoring south just off Tulagi Island, just over 40 kilometres north of Honiara. A large group of Japanese aircraft, Vals and Zeros, attacked the tanker. She sank early the next morning with the loss of 19 men. The wreck sits in 58 metres with the

shallowest part of the deck in about 43 metres. This is a very deep dive, so care needs to be taken. It is a fantastic wreck, so large that numerous dives are needed to just get a basic understanding of it. The highlights of the wreck are the three large stern guns, the bridge, the bow area and the engine room.

USS Aaron Ward

This 1,800 ton 105 metre long destroyer was attacked by more Japanese aircraft during the same attack on the *Kanawha*. She was bombed multiple times and just before midnight she sank 7.5 kilometres southeast of Tulagi. The wreck is in 70 metres, with the deck in almost 55 metres. Parts of the wreck are even deeper, so care needs to be taken. This is an amazing wreck, probably the second best shipwreck I've dived. The bow guns still point skyward and the bow itself, built for speed, is a sobering sight. Back near the now-fallen bridge,

From left:

The huge prop of HMNZS *Moa* is a great photo opportunity

One of the many anti-aircraft guns on the USS *Aaron Ward*

One of the depth charges still on the stern of HMNZS *Moa*

Kelly McFadyen is dwarfed by one of the bow guns of the USS *Aaron Ward*

the anti-aircraft guns are aimed high at the enemy. There are stern guns, depth charges and torpedo tubes to see, as well as the twin prows. A brilliant dive.

HMNZS Moa

This small corvette was only just over 50 metres long, but that did not stop her sinking the *I-1* submarine with sistership HMNZS *Kiwi*. She was also sunk during the same attack that got



From the top:
 USS Kanawha
 1943
 Kyusyu Maru was
 originally high and
 dry as shown in
 this 1944 photo
 USS Aaron Ward
 before the war



The stern of the Japanese submarine I-7

the two US warships. The wreck is located up in a corner of Tulagi Harbour, so visibility is not always great. Despite this, it's easy to find your way around. This is the shallowest of the wrecks at Tulagi, only 36 metres to the deck and about 43 metres to the silty bottom. The prop is still in place and makes a great photograph. At the stern there are depth charges and forward there's a large gun. The superstructure has collapsed and the hull opened up a bit amidships. As this is a small ship it is pretty tight inside, so only limited penetration is possible, including parts of the engine room. A nice little wreck.

AIRCRAFT

There are a few different aircraft that can be dived in the Honiara area, including a Boeing B-17 bomber west of the town and a few Kawanishi H6K 'Mavis' flying boats and parts of a Catalina flying boat. The B-17 is a shore dive, while the Mavis planes are good second dives after the US warships at Tulagi.

OTHER LOCATIONS

There are also other locations in the Solomons where there's diving and also World War II wrecks. The wreck of the *Toa Maru* in Gizo is especially good and there is also a Mitsubishi Zero fighter and a Grumman Hellcat. At Munda there is another freighter, *Kashi Maru* and a couple of US aircraft. There are two more Japanese wrecks at Uepi, the *Azusa Maru* and *Iwami Maru*.



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