



# WINGED WONDERS

When people talk wrecks, most imagine the rusting hulk or the rotting wooden frame of a ship from a bygone era on the seafloor. But there's another category – these are smaller, small enough to swim around on a single dive. And while a lot of these wrecks now rest on the bottom of the ocean, they began as machines of the air or aeroplanes.

Most aircraft wrecks result from action in World War Two. Luckily for southern hemisphere divers and in Australasia in particular, many are found in the large sea battle arenas of the Pacific, notably the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, and are usually in warm, clear tropical water. Some of these submerged aircraft are well known and feature regularly. Others are less legendary but just as interesting. And while a lot has been written about the history of these aircraft and how their flying days were cut short, the picturesque nature of these wrecks is usually overlooked.

+ MYSTERIOUS, HAUNTING, MAJESTIC – WRECKS INVOKE DIFFERENT REACTIONS IN DIVERS. SOME GET THEIR KICKS STUDYING THE HISTORY AND FATEFUL ORIGINS OF WRECKS; OTHERS JUST LIKE EXPLORING THEM AS THEY LAY ON THE BOTTOM. MORE OFTEN THAN NOT WRECKS HAVE AN AURA OR MYSTIQUE, ESPECIALLY THOSE THAT HAVE, OR ARE RUMOURED TO HAVE, TREASURE ABOARD. EVEN TODAY THERE'S STILL A RELENTLESS HUNT FOR THE SUNKEN TREASURES OF THE MANILA GALLEONS.

: EMMA & LYNDON TURNER



Top: Macro photo opportunities abound on these wrecks. This Fang Blenny has taken up residence in a machine gun barrel on the B-25 wreck off of Madang, PNG

Left: The B-17 *Blackjack* in Milne Bay just screams to have its photo taken

Main: The F6F-3 Hellcat *Betsy II* is in shallow water and is a prime candidate for black and white photos

Perhaps one of the most famous aircraft wrecks is the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress *Blackjack* resting in about 50 metres of water near Boga Boga village, Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea.

Of all the aircraft wrecks we've dived, this is probably the most picturesque. This is not due to prolific sea life but rather because of its large intact airframe. Only the tip of the starboard horizontal stabiliser is bent upwards and the nose cone is slightly crushed, probably when the aircraft hit the water and sank to the seafloor.

The engines still have all their propellers attached and guns are still mounted in their turrets. The machine-guns in the tail turret still move freely even after

Cruising around the aircraft the dorsal gun turret also competes for the photographer's attention. At the tail, it's easy to see how the B-17 was nicknamed 'The Big-Assed Bird'. This area is also one of the most alluring parts of the wreck – the fabric that once covered the rudder and elevators has long since rotted away and now the sun streaming through the skeletal remains is striking.

It's usually about now that your narcosis-induced dream world is shattered as your dive computer starts beeping at you to ascend. At the depth of the *Blackjack* you don't get much bottom time without going into deco. However a fixed ascent line takes you back to a sloping reef wall, with all its entertaining marine life to distract you during deco stops.

with doors that can be opened by hand to reveal bombs still inside the bomb bay. The wreck is now also home to many soft corals which add some magnificent flashes of colour to the slowly decaying frame.

Similar to *Blackjack*, the material covering the control surfaces has rotted away leaving the ribbed structure. Unfortunately this wreck lies near the mouth of a river and the visibility suffers as a result. But with a wide angle lens, getting in close and shooting upwards, this is a great opportunity for some spectacular photographs. An added bonus is the prospect of seeing nearby resident pygmy seahorses. As if lens selection wasn't complicated enough!

The Solomon Islands are also the resting place for many picturesque aircraft wrecks. The area around Gizo in the Western Province seems to have more than its fair share of these aircraft wrecks, with at least three close by.

Not far from Quomu Island is the wreck of a Grumman Hellcat fighter aircraft. This wreck is only in 11 metres of water and as such is a very easy dive. This aircraft is generally intact and you can even sit in the cockpit – minus tank and BC of course! Because of the shallow site, there's plenty of light and the water's usually clear. But the wreck doesn't have much growth to add colour. The airframe lends itself to black and white photography and with a good wide angle lens it's easy to capture the whole frame in one image.

Just offshore from the local produce markets at Gizo is another wrecked fighter aircraft, a Japanese Mitsubishi Zero in only 8 to 10 metres of water. There are plenty of photo ops here, but the bottom is very silty. Careful finning will ensure that silt doesn't ruin your shots or the view. Given the wreck's close proximity to the mainland, water runoff can affect the vis. Definitely don't try it after rain.

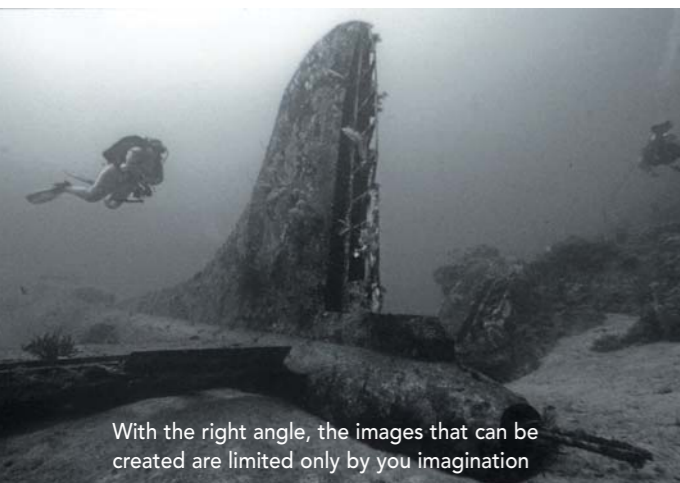
The dull colour of the wrecked airframe is contrasted with strong reds of anemones and clownfish which have made the wreck their home. One particularly large and bright anemone has taken hold just behind the engine



Top: The ribbed structure of the Jake aileron  
Bottom: The best way to get photos of an aircraft wreck, use a wide-angle lens, get in close and shoot upwards



This Hellcat is intact and a diver can even sit in the cockpit



With the right angle, the images that can be created are limited only by your imagination

## // THE APPARITION SOON CHANGES INTO THE AWE-INSPIRING IMAGE OF AN INTACT BOMBER TRAPPED IN A TIME CAPSULE //



Sun streaming through the skeletal remains

more than 50 years of corrosive conditions on the seafloor. And because of its remoteness and depth, little damage, looting or pilfering of the wreck has occurred over the years.

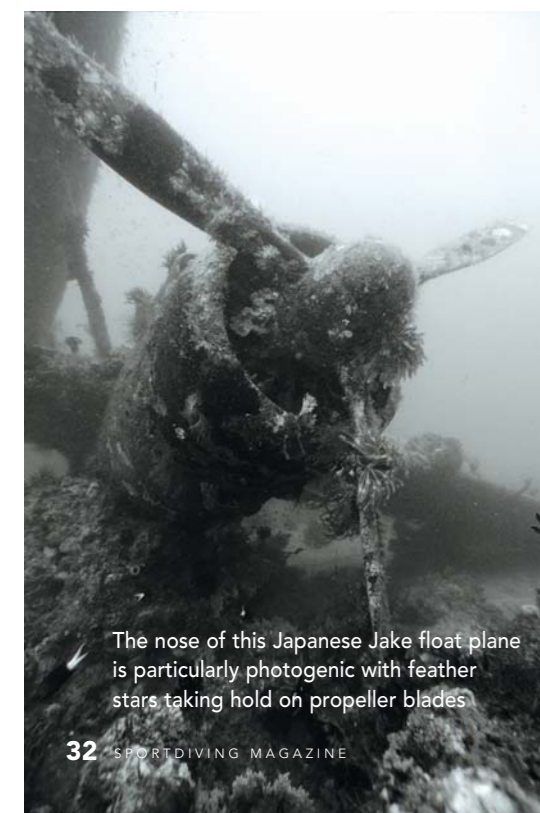
Descending to the wreck, even in the excellent visibility surrounding it, the first glimpse of the aircraft is really ghostly. The apparition soon changes into the awe-inspiring image of an intact bomber trapped in a time capsule.

Settling on the sand in front of the aircraft, the engines and their propellers are just screaming to be photographed. Framing the engines and propellers is easy with a wide angle lens, and the deep indigo of the water at 50 metres is an excellent backdrop to the already stunning scene.

On the eastern side of New Britain in Papua New Guinea, not far from Lindenhafen, are the remains of a Japanese float plane base from World War Two. Here lie the remains of a Japanese Jake float plane which is also relatively intact. The aircraft is upside down with the starboard float broken off and lying not far from the main wreck.

Not much is known about the wreck and how it got there. It was discovered relatively recently by the crew of the MV *Stardancer* when they were conducting exploratory charters down the east south coast of New Britain.

The nose of the aircraft is particularly interesting with feather stars taking hold on propeller blades to feed in the sweeping current. The aircraft is replete



The nose of this Japanese Jake float plane is particularly photogenic with feather stars taking hold on propeller blades

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cowling and resembles a flame licking its way back along the fuselage.

Another Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft wreck that isn't as deep as *Blackjack* lies just off shore in about 18 meters not far from Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. This wreck is less famous, as most divers come to dive on the more well-known Bonegi wrecks nearby and other more famous shipwrecks that dot the shoreline to the west of Honiara on Guadalcanal. This B-17, however, is not intact. The rear section of fuselage behind the wing is broken off, its whereabouts uncertain. Over the years the wreck has suffered from salvaging and scavenging, but it's still very picturesque, in particular the engines and cockpit. The wreck makes a great dive so ask to do it if you're in the area and are shipwrecked out.

The plane wrecks mentioned here in the Solomons and Papua New Guinea aren't the only ones available to divers. There's also the wreck of a Vought Corsair fighter aircraft Gizo and Munda and a large Japanese flying boat near Tulagi. In Papua New Guinea there's a Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter aircraft at China Strait in Milne Bay. Each one of these has their own individual attractions.

And there obviously are numerous as yet undiscovered aircraft wrecks scattered throughout the region. More so probably than all the as yet undiscovered Manila Galleons. If you're after something a little different to the average accessible shipwreck, next trip consider putting some picturesque planes on your list.

wrecks°



The Corsair wreck in Gizo, Solomon Islands is very broken up. This is the remains of the engine block.

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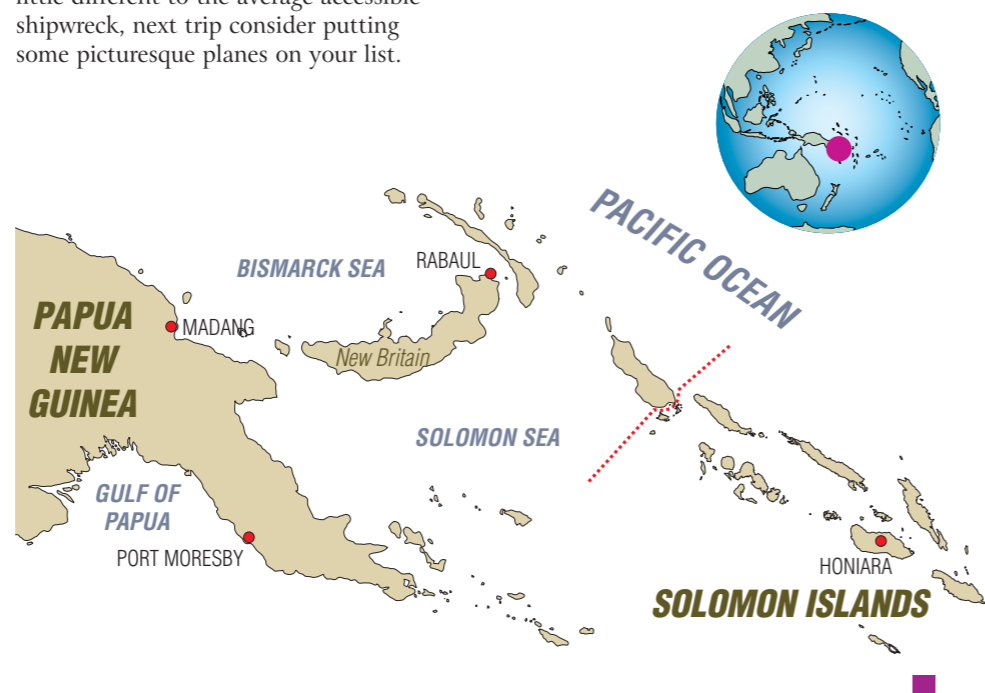
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The history of *Blackjack* and more on the F6F-3 Hellcat *Betsy II* Bureau Number 25839 is available at www.pacificwrecks.com



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