

> ON 19 JANUARY 1988 DIEPPOISE, THE ROYALE'S (NAVY) LAST WOODEN PATROL BOAT, WAS SCUTTLED IN THE NOUMEA LAGOON. HERE IS THE STORY OF THE COUNTRY'S FIRST ARTIFICIAL REEF.

## A FIVE STAR DIVE

:PIERRE LARUE

In 1986, the local newspaper advised that the patrol boat *La Dunkerquoise* would be laid up and sunk at sea during a shooting exercise, as is traditional in the French Navy. Immediately, several New Caledonian divers realised this ship could become an exceptional and original dive site if submerged in the lagoon. Michel Beaumont, a member of Fortunes de Mer Calédoniennes (Fortunes of the Sea), began to make enquiries, but it was too late. But fate intervened; its sister ship *La Dieppoise* was reaching the end of its potential in July 1987 so Jacques Mainguet, chairman of the regional FFESSM committee, put forward a project to Philippe du Couedic de Kergoaler, administrator of Maritime Affairs, responsible for the coordination of such requests. The same month Captain Degrees du Lou, Naval Commander for New Caledonia,



obtained the necessary authorisations from the Minister of Defence and the High Commissioner of the French Republic. The dossier was completed with favourable opinions from the committee for the Protection of the Environment and the New Caledonian Association for the Protection of Nature. The board of Noumea's Port Authority and its chairman Patrick Muller also offered to cover the cost of pumping the fuel tanks to eliminate all risk of pollution. Michel Beaumont suggested the ship should be immersed at the west part of Tabou Reef near the Amedee Lighthouse with its tourist infrastructure. On 4 December the regional FFESSM committee confirmed this choice.

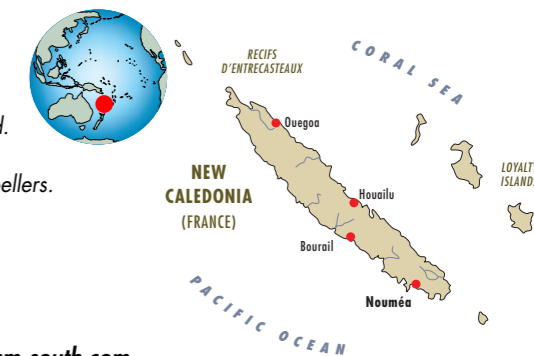
### A MOVING IMMERSION

An order dated 30 December 1987 emanating from the Naval Commander specified that the ex patrol boat *La Dieppoise* would be scuttled in the

Main: Some days superstructures disappear in a cloud of anchovies.

Top: La Dieppoise, 26 metres on sand.

Left: The rich fauna near the two propellers.



> LINK: [www.newcaledoniatourism-south.com](http://www.newcaledoniatourism-south.com)

Top to bottom:  
La Dieppoise's agony.  
(Photo Thierry Perron)

Near the funnel, the boat-siren  
was now silent.

Inside the wheelhouse, the  
wheel bar is still in place.



lagoon on the morning of 12 January 1988. Towards 7 o'clock, the patrol boat *La Glorieuse* got under way. On board were Captain Degrees du Lou and the commanders of all ships based at Nouméa, plus three from the former patrol boat: Lieutenant Commander Thil, Lieutenant Vernanchet, and a Chief Petty Officer.

In their bags were six blocks of plastic explosives divided into two packs, a few metres of slow burning fuse and some igniters. It was to be their job less than an hour later, to deliver the coup de grace to the grey hull.

Facing the sun, held to port by the tug *Pivert*, *La Dieppoise* was no more than a drifting pontoon; the inflatable dinghy and its divers had been alongside since just before 9 o'clock. The last four sailors remaining aboard during the last trip were evacuated and preparations for the last act began. One charge in the bows, one at the stern, just enough to remove a few square metres of wood

Right: The *La Dieppoise* was still  
in action around South Pacifique.  
(Photo Marine nationale)



in the depths. The divers left. "Firing in two minutes".

At 9.17, a first explosion, first plume of smoke, followed 30 seconds later by a second. Then followed 13 minutes of agony. For a few seconds the stem of *La Dieppoise* pointed towards the blue sky, whilst a Gardian from the 9S naval aviation squadron passed overhead for a last homage.

"It is sad, really sad", commented Commander of the Batral Jacques Cartier, "but it is probably better for a ship to finish at the bottom of the sea than in a demolition yard". It is thanks to him that the patrol boat went down to the sounds of Mozart's Requiem, broadcast over loud speakers from the *La Glorieuse*. "Ships have a soul and some of *La Dieppoise's* remains there", stated the commander.

**AN UNFORGETTABLE DIVE**  
In 1990, The congress of New Caledonia Territory classified this site as an underwater reserve. Two buoys fixed at either end of the vessel facilitate its location and mooring for divers' crafts. This dive is regularly programed by all Noumea's dive centres.

The wreck rests, slightly tilted to port, on sand at 26 metres. A rich ecosystem has developed from nothing. Rapidly micro-organisms, then invertebrates fixed themselves in place to allow a food chain to develop. A diverse range of fauna rushed to occupy different shelters, accessible from many openings.

By cycles the superstructures disappear in clouds of anchovies, traversed by rushes of threadfin jack or small bonitos. On the starboard side of the funnel, you may catch a glimpse of the boat's siren. Continue down in the direction of the windlass on the forward deck, turn



# LA DIEPPOISE

around to face the after-castle. The spectacle is magnificent. Very quickly you'll be amidst a succession of schoolmaster snapper, parrotfish, emperors and groupers.

You'll easily be able to reach the inside of the wheelhouse by the two side doors. The wheel bar is still in place and will allow keen photographers to have a field day. Access under the deck via the gangways to the radio room, cabins and holds for the boldest, is now strongly discouraged because of the deterioration of the interior of the ship after more than 18 years under water.

The hull sides, with ribs missing in some places, let you glimpse the machine room. Go along the vessel as far as the stern. At the end of their shaft, since the first moments of immersion, to a bank of netted sweetlips. Today, many zig zag oysters *Lopha cristagali* encrusted with sponges cover the blades. Their bright scarlet colour, revealed by the beam of a dive light, will astonish you. And during your exploration, you may also be lucky enough to meet the guardian of this place: an impressive Queensland grouper *Epinephelus lanceolatus*.

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