

:BOB HALSTEAD AND CRAIG DE WIT

# Coral Sea SHIPWRECK



> I WAS POLISHING MY CAMERA'S DOME PORT AND CONTEMPLATING A TWO MONTH SURFACE INTERVAL WHEN THE PHONE RANG. MY FELLOW PNG DIVE ADVENTURER CRAIG DE WIT WAS CALLING FROM HIS LIVEBOARD MV *GOLDEN DAWN* IN THE CORAL SEA. HE AND I HAVE SHARED MANY DIVING EXPLOITS AND SHARE THE PHILOSOPHY OF TREATING DIVERS LIKE ADULTS AND PROVIDING THEM WITH REALLY ADVENTUROUS DIVING.

Craig pioneered technical diving in PNG, and has built up a fantastic reputation with experienced divers during his 17 years operating MV *Golden Dawn*. He sounded exuberant – he had just found the remains of an ancient shipwreck. This is his new tale of daring on the high seas.....

It's fair to say I've experienced some of the best diving imaginable. Even so, my own imaginative stories sometimes confuse dreams with reality. For example they include how I saved the fair maiden from the sea monster, along with true tales of my spectacular marine animal encounters, and magical dives on WW2 wrecks. I'm fortunate to have had so many wonderful dives. I'm going to tell you how one of my dreams became reality when I discovered, purely by chance, a previously unknown and historic shipwreck.

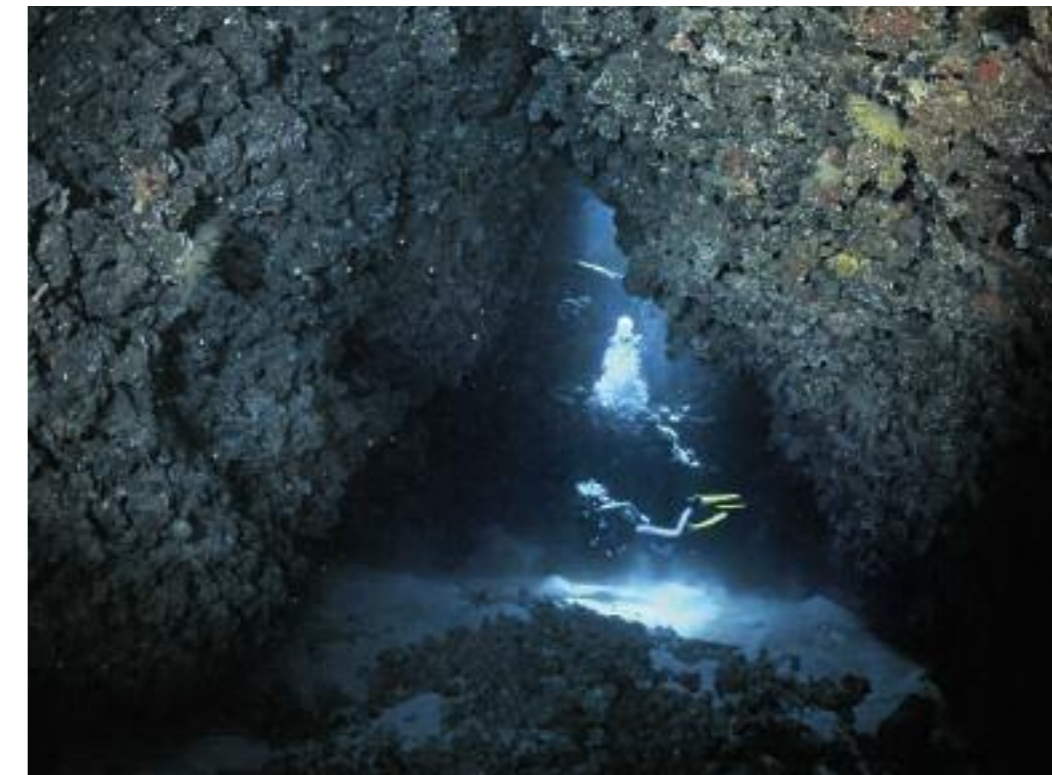
I always seek to push the boundaries of adventure diving. One of my signature regions is the northern Coral Sea and after all these years I'm still finding new dive sites. On an expedition into the Coral Sea in February 2009, with six 'repeat offender' guests aboard, we were diving a large, seldom visited reef system. I could tell you where it is, but then I'd have to turn your air off. This particular exploratory dive was a great success. We dived a beautiful wall with sheer vertical drop to 30 metres with an overhang, then a slope down into a nice current flow where we met a few large silvertip and grey reef sharks, plus tons of fish life. We'd completed our third dive and were drifting on the surface over the reef top waiting for the dive tender. I ducked my head back under the ocean to see what we were floating over and immediately saw a large anchor almost directly below me. I did a double take and mouthed a few happy expletives. The divers within earshot thought I was experiencing a moment of madness or something more

sinister - so I repeated in more correct English "There's a %\$###@ @!!! (very) large anchor under us!" I dived back down to get a more intimate perspective. This was no modern anchor... I had no doubt this was from a ship from the distant past. The other divers were soon around me like seagulls fighting over fish and chips.

We were all taking pictures, video footage, and bumping into each other when another anchor the same size with some chain was found not far from the first. I could feel the mood of my fellow divers pitching as the reality of what we were looking at played out, and my ever-

fertile and hopeful mind was ticking over recalling stories of lost Spanish galleons and treasures of gold... could this really be a shipwreck or just jetsam from a ship that had a close call? Tank gauge readings were well below the PADI recommended minimum so we returned to the boat for a surface interval.

The next day we planned to survey the site. We discussed strategy and wondered what gold would look like after it has been under the sea for ages. All eyes were glittering. We were soon in the water, implements in hand just in case we needed to break open treasure chests. We measured the newly discovered anchors.



Left top: The wreck site on top of the reef  
Left bottom: Craig de Wit swims over the two largest anchors  
Above: Leigh Paine explores caverns in the wall near the wreck site



Above: Beautiful coral garden at the anchorage

They were large and certainly from a big impressive ship. *Golden Dawn's* anchors were tiny in comparison.

The group split into working partners, BJ and Ch'ng measuring and shooting photos with film, John Morris shooting video, and Wen Tsae and me taking pictures with digital cameras. Shortly after we commenced our chores we were joined by an olive sea snake that seemed just as curious as we were to search the bottom - fantastic I thought, story in mind.

river rocks doing out here in the middle of the Coral Sea? Then it hit me - the rocks were ballast. This old vessel had died right here. And the rocks showed a direction for us - the debris trail!

Michael Walker and Sarah Percy-Dove became my models so I could photograph the relics with a perspective of size. Sarah swam beside one particular large hunk of metal and I took the shot, she then pointed out the hole in one end. Hmmm, I thought... cylindrical... I wonder if the

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This can be the sea serpent we had to wrestle before finding the treasure.

We started seeing other wrecked bits and pieces - more chain, brass pins, nails, bits seemingly fused with the reef, unnatural shapes of coral with bits of metal sticking out - and then suddenly I noticed thousands of black river rocks. What are

hole comes out the other end. Looking more closely I could see it did not and was disappointed, but then I noticed it had a knob on that end and I realised it was a cannon. An ancient cannon, like in *Master and Commander!* Russell Crowe, eat your heart out!

At this point I began to effervesce more than I could breathe. My mind was spinning with what I was looking at. My camera was smoking, my heart was racing - this is the find I had always dreamed of. I was living my dream!

It wasn't long before we realized that another hunk of metal beside the first was also a cannon. Great! We had two anchors, two cannons, shackles of broken chain, brass bits and pieces, river rocks and other metal remnants - what more might we find?

Then I heard the tinkling sound that Michael makes with his pointer on his tank to attract attention. I swam over to find him waving feverishly above yet another anchor, so I thought... OK another anchor... big deal... But this was a bit like that scene in *Crocodile Dundee*. Those other two anchors aren't really anchors - THIS is an anchor! It was a giant and confirmed she must have been an impressively large ship.

I think it was about at this point that my mind was in absolute overload, yet just a little further past this moment was another huge anchor - her twin - the complete set of 'Mother of all Mother's anchors'. All that appeared to be missing was the cutlery and the timber hull. It was time to surface and work out what to do next.

The body of the ship must have been timber, which has long gone, eroded, eaten and smashed beyond recognition by the large waves that would form during storms. The remaining skeleton is all that is left of some great ship that met her fate on this remote and poorly

charted reef system. Her belly must have split open and her contents strewn onto the reef and perhaps over the side of the wall into the abyss.

Aware that Australia has strict legislation regarding historic shipwrecks, Craig asked me what he should do about reporting the find. I soon learned that the man to contact was Ed Slaughter of the Queensland Museum based in Townsville. Ed spoke to Craig directly and confirmed they had no information on the wreck and it could be a completely new discovery. He authorised Craig to make survey dives with the understanding that nothing be disturbed. Even if they did not find any treasure, Craig could be in for a reward.

Craig sent me a brilliant photo of one of the largest anchors together with six divers fitting comfortably behind the enormous flukes - nearly three metres across - and I sent a news release to *Dive Log* reporting the find and asking for any information. I also called some friends to see if we could organize another expedition to the site in April. I'd had enough of surface intervals. Time to get my camera wet again.

Craig recruited some divers and, with Irvin Rockman and model Leigh Paine, we all joined *Golden Dawn* in Port Moresby. Our voyage included dives at Eastern Fields, further exploration of the Northern Coral Sea Reefs and some dives out of Port Moresby. The climax was the return to the wreck site.

The water had cleared but a southeast swell was breaking on the reef. Since the

wreck is in the turbulent surf zone and quite shallow, this was a challenge and we found it was only possible to dive at high tide. With sparkling sunlight and the breaking surf, the scene was rapturous - one of the most exhilarating I've ever photographed. An out-of-film emergency rushed me to the boat to reload and return. Yes I'm still shooting film, and happy - digital cannot capture images of the piercing sun's rays that illuminated the wreck.

Back home in Cairns I was in my office gloating over my photographs when the phone rang. "Hi Bob, Ben Cropp here, I just saw your piece in *Dive Log*. I dived that wreck in the 1980s!" Ben is one of Australia's iconic underwater filmmakers and lives up the road at Port Douglas. We've known each other 30 years. I recently went to a fancy dress party at Ben's place. I ripped up an old shirt, covered myself with fake blood, attached an inflatable shark and went as - well, Ben Cropp. If you haven't read Ben's autobiographical book *Blood in the Water*, find a copy now.

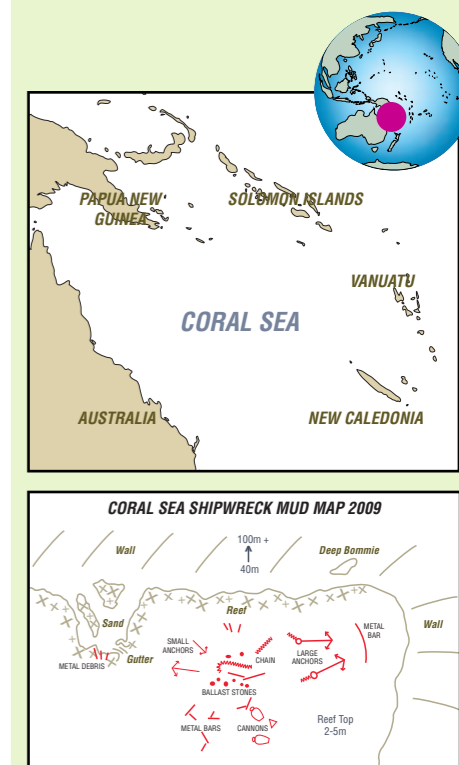
I should have known Ben had dived there before us, as he spent years searching the Coral Sea for shipwrecks - according to his list he's dived over 40 of them! I assumed that since the Queensland Museum didn't know of it, it must have been one Ben missed. In his book (page 128) is his photo of one of the cannons I'd just dived! However Ben was adamant he'd only re-discovered the wreck and that it had been found much earlier. His research convinced him it was a ship that sank in 1826. The story doesn't end there; Ed Slaughter plans an official



Left to right: Craig's lucky adventurers pose with one of the huge anchors when he first re-discovered the wreck

One of the two smaller anchors with broken shank

The two big anchors



The Coral Sea is one of the last pristine tropical marine environments in the world. While coral reefs are vanishing globally, the Coral Sea is actually thriving. Due to its remoteness the area remains largely untouched, and is internationally recognised for its rich biodiversity and important heritage values. 2009 saw the Australian government declare the area under its jurisdiction a Conservation Zone. This is over one million square kilometres in size, three times the size of the Great Barrier Reef. For more information visit: [www.environment.gov.au](http://www.environment.gov.au) or [www.wwf.org.au/coralsea](http://www.wwf.org.au/coralsea)



*Above: The adventurers' dive live-aboard, MV Golden Dawn*

*Left: Pirate Captain Craig de Wit*



expedition to the wreck with his marine archaeologists aboard.

I'll leave it to Craig to finish his tale:

*On the ride back to Golden Dawn one could not help but wonder about how she met her fate? What kind of ship was she? What flag did she fly? Where was she going? Where had she come from? What century exactly? What of the poor souls who stood no chance of rescue in a time when communications were virtually nonexistent? Did they escape in the ship's boats, were they drowned – or taken by sharks?"*

Indeed, all questions to pursue. I have a feeling this trail has a long way to go. Like all true adventures, there is more to the story. I'd better polish my dome port.

PS: Any rumours you may hear about Craig wearing a large gold coin around his neck are totally false.

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