

EVER HAD A WEEK WHERE EVERYTHING GOES RIGHT? WELL IT HAPPENED TO ME JUST LAST WEEK HERE IN VANUATU. THREE NEW AND FASCINATING DIVES IN QUICK SUCCESSION, ALL IN AREAS OR SITES WELL KNOWN TO ME. THE FIRST ON THE MAGNIFICENT SS COOLIDGE, THE SECOND ON ANOTHER HISTORIC NEARBY WRECK CALLED THE TUI TUATE, THE THIRD ON THE WRECK OF THE LOST COASTAL TRADER THE KATHLEEN NEAR PORTT VILA. READ ON TO SEE HOW EVENTS UNFOLDED...

The week started with one of my frequent trips to Espiritu Santo to dive the famous wreck of the SS *Coolidge*. As most readers will be aware, the *Coolidge* was a luxury American passenger ship which was converted for wartime use. On her approach to Luganville in 1944, she sank after striking two 'friendly' mines. Living in the small capital Port Vila, I've been fortunate to travel north to dive this wreck many times over the last 18 months. Barry Holland, the manager of Aquamarine in Luganville on Santo, is a fellow tech diver who's helped me explore the wreck on many occasions. He had some exciting news for me on my arrival – the letters of the ship's name and home port were now visible on the stern starting at around 60 metres and he was keen to take me down to photograph them! It seems an Australian diver Andy Andrews had earlier discovered the letters and news of the exciting find was now spreading! How the letters had gone unnoticed for so many years since the sinking of the great ship in 1944 is anyone's guess. Photos of the stern taken whilst the ship sank, in Peter Stone's book *The Lady and the President* show no evidence of the letters. Perhaps they were covered or

GOOD LUCK COMES IN THREES!





Coastal trader The Kathleen was scuttled as a dive site near Hideaway Island for tourist divers. In 1987 cyclone Uma hit Port Vila causing massive destruction and also washed the Kathleen off the reef top into deeper water in around 40-50 metres. A few years later after another big storm she disappeared. We found her at just over 70 metres.

Left: The encrusted mast of The Kathleen.

Centre: The prop is still in place.

Below: The skeleton of the lifeboat keel sits behind the Coolidge at 70m.

Facing page, top: The foredeck.

Bottom: A lare fan on the Tui Tuate.



otherwise disguised in an attempt to obscure the ship's identity during the war? Anyway, they were on view now and I couldn't wait to see them.

A quick trip to the general store for three wire brushes, and Barry, Kevin Green (another well known local diver) and I set off for the dive. Barry and Kevin would perform the dive on open circuit trimix, whilst I was diving my KISS CCR. The dive involves a 200 metre surface swim out to a midships mooring, followed by a diagonal descent down to the stern area. The Coolidge lies on her port side and as you approach the stern the naked starboard prop shaft comes into view, the prop having been salvaged many years earlier. Over the stern rail and the 30 centimetre high letters *President Coolidge* became apparent. Underneath in smaller letters could just be made out the home port 'San Francisco'. For the next 10 minutes we scrubbed the letters with the wire brushes at depths between about 62 and 68 metres. After that we swam off to inspect the wrecked lifeboat and some other debris on the sand behind the ship to allow time for the dust to settle, then came back to take the photos shown here. Well worth the effort I believe! I'm sure you will agree, this adds yet another attraction to a world class wreck site for advanced divers to enjoy.



The wreck of the Tui Tuate, a tug used during the salvage of the 650 tons of bunker oil from the Coolidge in the 70s, was scuttled in the western end of the Segond Channel in about 1990.

Centre: Images taken last year showed the funnel in place, but it's now gone and a large hole gives access to the boiler.

Below left: The strong currents have carved a deep trough around her.

Bottom right: The stern of the Kathleen may offer a chance for more exploration.

That very afternoon came exciting new dive number two! The wreck of the Tui Tuate, a tug used by Ian Lockley during the salvage of the 650 tons of bunker oil from the Coolidge in the 70's, was scuttled in the western end of the Segond Channel in about 1990. She started life in the 1940's in an Aberdeen shipyard as the Empire Shirley, 105 feet long and 232 tons. She underwent a number of name changes becoming the Tapuhi (1947-1973), then the Tui Tuwate and finally the Tui Tuate. The wreck has significant historical significance as she was also involved in the rescue of over 170 of 733 passengers in the New Zealand Wahine ferry disaster in 1968. She was scuttled by the owner (Clement Griffith) in a secret spot, as he believed the wreck was too cramped and dangerous for divers. However some persistent detective work and searching by Kevin Green of Aquamarine uncovered its location in 46 metres, and he has taken only two or three groups of divers to her since. So I felt very privileged to dive her with Barry and Kev. The dive site is current prone and subject to poor visibility, but on this occasion luck was on our side and we spent 30 minutes exploring this small but unique piece of history. Sitting alone on the sand, a deep trough is

carved around her which bears witness to the strong currents which sweep past. Batfish, large pelagics and numerous reef fish stand guard over her forlorn structure. My time ran out before any serious penetration of the wreck could be performed but there appear to be some good areas for exploration near the stern. Trevor





Kathleen was scuttled as a dive site near Hideaway Island for tourist divers. In 1987 the full fury of cyclone Uma was unleashed on Pt Vila causing massive destruction, and in the process washing the poor Kathleen off the top of the reef into deeper water. For few years she was dived by locals in around 40-50 metres, but then after another big storm disappeared into even deeper water. Since then a couple of divers claim to have caught glimpses of her (including the ubiquitous Kevin Green!) but her exact location was unknown.

I had previously dived to 90 metres searching the steep seaward side of the reef in the mistaken belief that this was where she lay. On this occasion we searched in a radial pattern with the boat's sounder on the landward side of the reef and at 70 metres a small blip registered. Taking a compass bearing from the top of the reef, myself and my

buddy Dale started our search. On the downward slope we picked up the debris trail from the wreck and followed this down to the sand at just over 70 metres. No wreck. We decided to swing left initially in the direction the trail seem to be heading as it petered out. No wreck. With five minutes bottom time left, we swam to the right until in the distance I picked up the vague shadow... initially thinking my eyes were playing tricks on me. But gradually the shadow solidified into a small wreck sitting upright on the sand, prop in situ, and a large cargo hatch lying next to her. We could not have been more excited if we had found the Titanic or a galleon full of treasure... that is the thrill of even such minor discovery! With two minutes to spare, I swam part of the wreck blazing away with my camera then started the ascent and deco, already planning my return to this pretty little wreck. We returned the very next weekend and captured the images shown here.

Three great dives, all new to me, but all in my backyard and right under my nose. Part of the thrill of diving is never quite knowing what lies around the corner. What a great sport!

Jackson from Australia is one of the lucky few to have dived the Tui, and his photos taken last year show the ship with its funnel in place. That is now gone, presumably fallen victim to the tides, a large hole giving access to the boiler in its place.

The next few days were spent diving the Coolidge and I thought things couldn't get much better. Riding high on the excitement of the great diving in Santo, on my arrival home in Vila I called a friend to see if he felt like a dive. We decided to have another look for the lost wreck of the coastal trader The Kathleen. The

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard 'Harry' Harris is an Australian anaesthetist and physician in diving medicine currently living and working in Vanuatu. A keen cave, rebreather and technical diver, he used a Nikon D100 in a Subal housing to create the images in this article. More of his photos can be seen at www.divedoc.net