

> FROM AUGUST 1942 THROUGH TO FEBRUARY 1943, THE MAIN ISLAND IN THE SOLOMONS ARCHIPELAGO WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN A PLEASANT OR SAFE PLACE TO BE. DURING THIS PERIOD IN WORLD WAR 2 A SERIES OF DEVASTATING BATTLES TOOK PLACE BETWEEN THE JAPANESE IMPERIAL FORCES AND THE UNITED STATES WITH IT'S ALLIED FORCES. THE GOAL OF BOTH SIDES IN THIS CONFLICT WAS THE CONTROL OF GUADALCANAL AND THE FLORIDA ISLANDS TO THE NORTH, ALL OF WHICH WERE STRATEGIC STAGING POINTS FOR AN INVASION OF AUSTRALIA.



Gorgonian on the Bonegi 1



A valve handle near the bow of the USS Kanawha

IRON BOTTOM SOUND

: NEIL VINCENT

These days it's very different – Guadalcanal is peaceful and safe. All that remains of the war here is the memories of some older local people and many of the ships and planes lost during the conflict. Several of these lie in Iron Bottom Sound, the apt name given to the stretch of water between Guadalcanal and the islands to the north.

As newly arriving divers, sitting comfortably in a Solomon Airlines aircraft touching down at Henderson Field, the contrast with a young pilot seated in a P38 Lightning landing at this same airport all those years ago felt extreme. His joy was probably due to living another day, surviving another mission, maybe unlike some of his mates. Visiting the Solomons brings this excitement of diving into history, but it's also sobering to see and touch actual results of the waste and devastation.

Hirokawa Maru, locally known as **Bonegi 1** was our first dive at 10am on the morning we arrived. Sure this is a shore dive – but the stern is over 50 metres deep! After gearing up on shore, we

swam briefly over sand to what was a morphing of a steel wreck and a tropical coral reef. In the shallows the coral was using the rusting steel as a base upon which to grow. Some ship parts were still recognisable, especially the broken anchor with its chain, but moving deeper, the coral growth diminished and **Bonegi 1** became a real rusted steel wreck. It lays on its side so we could swim into the holds, penetrate cabins and working compartments, move out along the masts then back onto the side of the ship where an interesting hole hints at the battle which sunk her. The hole's shape shows that a major internal explosion peeled the steel hull outwards. From this point on towards the bow, beautiful red seaweeds covered the hull.

Kinugawa Maru or Bonegi 2 is a very similar dive but shallower, so reaching the huge rudder and propeller shaft was much easier. The shaft, unfortunately, is minus a propeller – probably blasted off and sold for scrap during post-war salvaging of non ferrous metals which occurred on many of these ships. The areas at the stern which can be penetrated give divers a sense of the

destruction caused by the shelling from both land and sea.

Another shore dive, the **Kyusyu Maru**, locally known as **Ruanu** wreck, is named after a nearby river. This is a beautiful dive; the upper section of the wreck is covered in large gorgonian fans, soft corals, crinoids and hides many fish, especially lionfish. Save this beautiful shallow end until last – use the remainder of your air seeking out the small creatures hidden in this garden. Penetrating the wreck is very easy, allowing divers to swim through the hull to almost the engine room. Looking carefully at the wreckage is necessary to try to recognise the ship's equipment amongst the twisted beams and steel plates.

USS Aaron Ward was sunk on 7 April 1943 by Japanese aircraft near Mbungana Island in the Florida group. Initially three enemy aircraft bombed the destroyer; only one bomb was a direct hit astern of the engine room. The explosion knocked out power to the 5 inch and 40mm guns. Despite this horrific incident, the crew manually kept the guns firing. Even though two of the three bombs

Looking along the USS Aaron Ward with the life boat davit overhead



Gorgonian fans cover the shallow section of the Ruanu Wreck



Torpedo tubes on the USS Aaron Ward

A small anchor attached to the forecastle wall of the USS Kanawha

A Jeep on the sand about 20 metres from the hull of the USS John Penn

A beautiful garden of colour now uses the Ruanu Wreck as a base



'missed' they exploded close enough to cause concussion damage. One blast tore plates from the forward hull flooding the boiler-room, the second holed the ship towards the stern damaging the steering. Without steering the ship became uncontrollable. Three more aircraft attacked; two bombs exploded near the ship, mortally lifting the hull plates. Despite the crew's efforts to stop the leaking and pump out their ship, the *Aaron Ward* sank stern-first less than seven hours after the attack began.

Insight into the history behind the shipwrecks adds a completely different perspective to the dive. The battles fought around Guadalcanal, Savo Island and the Florida group were among the fiercest of the Pacific war. Imagining what it was like on the *USS Aaron Ward* the day it sank isn't possible, but knowing the history and studying photos of the ship afloat made the damage on the wreck, the skyward pointing guns, the broken stern, much more relevant.

It always surprises me how short and narrow these fast destroyers are. Swimming from one side of the deck to the other is easy, it's just under 11 metres wide. The partly collapsed bridge was our first view of the wreck. Moving sternwards on the starboard side, the most recognisable equipment is the torpedo tubes; behind these could be seen the collapsed rear funnel and the structure around it. Large sections of the deck had collapsed; we turned around the torpedo tubes and swam forward along the port side, past the bridge to the 5 inch guns on the front deck. The gun turrets fill much of the space, but there was also a badly broken up 40mm gun emplacement, the gun and mount are

DURING THE SAME ATTACK IN WHICH THE USS AARON WARD WAS SUNK, THE HEAVILY ARMED OILER USS KANAWHA ALSO WENT DOWN. THESE SHIPS WERE PRIZED TARGETS – SINKING A DESTROYER ELIMINATES ONE SHIP, BUT SINKING AN OILER EFFECTIVELY DISABLES A NUMBER OF WARSHIPS.

very distinctive in the jumbled steel. Completing the circuit of the forward section of the ship, we came upon a lifeboat davit still standing, the lifeboat long gone. There's much more to see but the depth severely limits time to explore. We stayed on the decks at about 60 metres and our bottom time was only 20 minutes.

For a fleet to continue fighting and extend their range, refuelling ships at sea or in remote locations is necessary. To do this, a special vessel called an 'oiler' basically a mobile petrol station, was developed. In the same attack in which the *USS Aaron Ward* was sunk, the heavily armed oiler *USS Kanawha* also went down. These ships were prized targets – sinking a destroyer eliminates one ship, but sinking an oiler effectively disables a number of warships.

USS Kanawha had been moored in Tulagi for about seven days. Fifteen enemy aircraft attacked. Like the *Aaron Ward*, the bombs which missed still damaged the hull, but the direct hits on *Kanawha* caused the most damage. One entered and exploded in the forward oil tank, another went down the funnel into the engine room, crippling the ship and setting it and the surrounding water on fire. Fighting a losing battle didn't stop the crew from trying to extinguish the flames. *USS PC 85*, just refuelled by the *USS Kanawha*, came alongside and evacuated most of the crew. When the battle permitted, other ships came to assist the *Kanawha*, trying to prevent it sinking, but were driven back when the ammunition stores began exploding. At 4 am the following day the *USS Kanawha* sank with the loss of 19 men.

Exploring the 145 metre long wreck

which sits upright in the mouth of Tulagi Harbour on sand at 60 metres, would take many dives. We had only two, so we dived the stern first, then the bow. We began on the stern by passing from the port to the starboard side of the ship through holes presumably caused by explosions. Much of the equipment and structure was badly damaged but still recognisable. Exiting the hull, out on the sand was a 5 inch unused shell, up on deck were 20mm and 40mm guns surrounded by blast protectors. Within these areas were empty quick-load shell cases and some GI helmets. The 5 inch guns were the main feature. I'm guessing the deck was timber as it was gone, leaving only the steel frame. A large skylight over the engine room was very impressive. On the bow attached to the forecastle wall is a small anchor (compared to the one hanging in the hawser tube on the bow port side); I'm unsure of the purpose of the smaller anchors. In this area were more anti aircraft guns and winches.

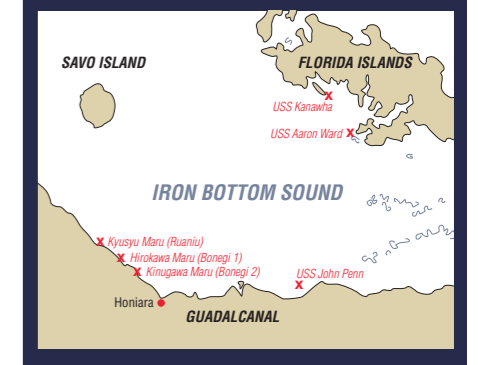
USS John Penn was attacked by Japanese torpedo planes on Friday 13 August 1943, after unloading a cargo at Henderson Field. Two destroyers near the armed transport ship began firing at the attacking aircraft before the *John Penn's* crew knew they were about to be attacked.

Flying only 15 metres above the sea, and to cause even more confusion, the attacking aircraft came from a number of directions simultaneously. Reading reports of the action, as can be expected, there is confusion as to what actually happened. It appears one aircraft successfully dropped a torpedo hitting the starboard side towards the stern. The pilot of a second attacking aircraft, hit by defensive fire coming from the ships, crashed his burning plane into the aft section of the *John Penn*. It is also reported that the third aircraft strafed the ships during the battle. This battle was short lived, from the start of the attack to the *USS John Penn* having sunk, was less than one hour.

The 145 metre long wreck is in 57 metres off Lungga Point about 10 kilometres east of Honiara. The stern separated from the ship when it sank and lies 400 metres astern. Our dive started at the end of the main section where the stern used to be, and access was easy. After weaving through some passageways Chris pointed out a white porcelain bowl – initially I



All aboard the dive boat... or off it





*A hole in the hull of
the Bonegi 1*

*Divers entering the
water*

*Five inch guns on the
USS Aaron Ward*



was confused but then realised it was a bed pan! I guess the sickbay must have been close by.

We swam about 20 metres out onto the sand and discovered a Jeep. This unexpected find seemed completely out of place, but when researching this article I found a reason for it being here. "On one trip to Noumea in New Caledonia, a new jeep was collected at the Army Base by E. Wallace Haynes. He brought it back to the John Penn and it was loaded aboard. On board the ship was a Commodore Anderson. This jeep was for his use. When the John Penn was in New Zealand collecting supplies, Mr Haynes drove Commodore Anderson around in the jeep". www.michaelmcfadyenscuba.info

The bridge has fallen from the superstructure in one complete piece and all the cables which once weaved up through the floor, now join the two modules together like a giant spider web.

Lyn had a second day on the USS John Penn, I stayed in the boat. During their dive, the current around the dive boat increased and I watched with concern the divers waving on the end of the deco lines like flags in the breeze. They were all happy to exit after their deco was finished. Apparently current is not uncommon on this dive!

For us there are still many more dives to do to explore these wrecks even further.

References:

Michael McFadyen Scuba Diving Website

www.michaelmcfadyenscuba.info/news.php

This site contains the best research material on the wrecks we dived plus much more. It's a must read before you go and, if you have access, while you're there.

Invader Charters www.invadercharters.com.au

This site also has information about the shipwrecks we dived plus many more we still want to dive as well as other diving in the area. There's also information on accommodation and local conditions.

Disclaimer: The author's trip to the Solomon Islands was Neil's prize in the Oztek 2009 Photographic competition which was generously donated by Invader Charters. Lyn's trip was fully paid for by the Vincents themselves.

QUICK TIPS Honiara is a short flight from the east coast of Australia and proved to be a great wreck diving location. Visiting divers basing themselves in Honiara, the Solomon Islands capital, will find the Pacific Casino Hotel is ideal accommodation, as Invader Charters have their offices and facilities in this complex. Invader Charters are a dive company capable of organising diving, ranging from teaching new divers open water certification through to taking appropriately certified divers onto the best wreck dives in the area. Some of the wrecks are accessed simply by walking into the water from the beach, others require Invader's 18 metre Randal dive vessel to travel along the coast or across Iron Bottom Sound.