



Compelling World War 2 Wreck Dives By Peter Pinnock

The Pacific was the biggest battleground in the Second World War. Naval battles raged from Pearl Harbour down to the Solomon Islands up through the Philippines and ultimately culminated at Iwo Jima in Japan. Distances covered were immense. Thousands of tons of ships and aircraft were lost in the Pacific by both the Americans and Japanese.



Today, very few remnants of the War remain on land. Six decades of corrosion and human expansion has taken its toll. Underwater the Pacific is littered with wrecks. Most of them are in deep water out of view, but a few of them lie within reach of the sport diver. Knowing the story behind the wreck brings the wreck to life. It's like touching the face of history. Here are the stories behind a few classic wreck dives in the Pacific.

Black Jack B17 Bomber - Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea

North of Milne Bay next to the village of Boga Boga is what many refer to as the best plane wreck in the world. On 11 July 1943 a B17 bomber with 10 men aboard took off from Henderson Airfield, Port



Moresby, and headed towards Rabaul to bomb the Japanese. As the serial number of the plane ended in 21 she was fondly known as Black Jack. The right side of the nose had the images of two playing cards: Jack and Ace making 21 in poker. On route to Rabaul she developed engine trouble but the crew still managed to offload the bombs on the target. Heading back to Port Moresby they were caught in a violent storm. Without



decent instrumentation they were soon lost off course and by now, running low on fuel. At the time, flying across the Pacific was comparable to island hopping with simple navigational leaps of faith. Captain Ralph de Loach decided to crash land on a beach. The beach was not wide enough and so he tried to land on the reef. 3 of the crew were injured but all managed to escape before the plane sank. Black Jack missed the edge of the reef and

headed into deep water landing in 45 metres of water with slight damage to the nose. The villagers rescued the crew when the life rafts didn't inflate properly and they all made it to safety. The unhurt crew members got two weeks leave in Sydney, and were sent back to combat.

Today Black Jack sits upright, her nose pointing away from the reef wall, as if revving up for her final journey home. Her four props are intact and the tail machine guns still rotate in their housing.

USS Saratoga (CV3) Aircraft Carrier - Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands

Saratoga, the first fast carrier in the United States Navy, was launched in 1925. With a length of 270 metres she was larger than the Titanic.

With a crew of 1600 and an armament of 90 aircraft, she could cruise at 32 knots.



Landing on a moving deck had never been done before and it was a skill that the Navy pilots had to quickly acquire - 107 pilots died in crash landings on the deck before a single shot was fired against the enemy. During the war she saw action in Guadalcanal, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands and Indonesia. During this time she was torpedoed twice and on 21 February 1945, was hit by 5 kamikaze fighters off Iwo Jima. At the end of the war, Saratoga held the record for the



greatest number of aircraft landed on a carrier, with a lifetime total of 98,549 landings in 17 years. She was awarded seven battle stars for her World War II service.

Saratoga was assigned to Operation Crossroads at Bikini Atoll to test the effect of the atomic bomb on naval vessels. She survived the first blast (Test ABLE), an air burst on 1 July 1946, with only minor damage, but was damaged beyond repair by the second blast (Test Baker) on 25 July, an underwater blast which was detonated 500 metres from the carrier.

Salvage efforts were prevented by radioactivity, and seven and one-half hours after the blast, with her funnel collapsed across her deck, Saratoga slipped beneath the surface of the lagoon.

Everything on the Saratoga is big. A dive on the bow gives a sense of the size of this wreck. Highlights of diving Saratoga are Curtis SV2c Helldivers in the hangar deck, TBF Avenger torpedo bombers and Twin housed 5 inch 38 calibre canons on the flight deck. Saratoga is the only diveable aircraft carrier in the Pacific.



HIJMS Nagato Battleship – Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands

The Nagato could well be the most infamous wreck in the Pacific. At the outbreak of World War II, Nagato was the flagship of the Combined Japanese Fleet, flying the flag of Admiral Yamamoto. On 2 December 1941 Nagato sent the signal "Niitakayama nobore 1208" - Climb Mount Niitaka. On 8 December the Japanese Carrier Strike Force attacked Pearl Harbour and dragged America into the war. The Nagato was the very ship, Admiral Yamamoto's flagship, from which he heard the final code signal, "Tora! Tora!





Tora!", informing him that the attack he engineered on Pearl Harbour was underway



The Nagato was the first battleship in the world to mount 16 inch (410 mm) guns, and her armour protection and speed made her one of the most powerful capital ships at the time of her commissioning. Her massive 16 inch guns could project a missile over 30 kilometres. These are the biggest guns ever used in naval warfare. It was a modified 16 inch shell from the Nagato that sunk the USS Arizona in Pearl

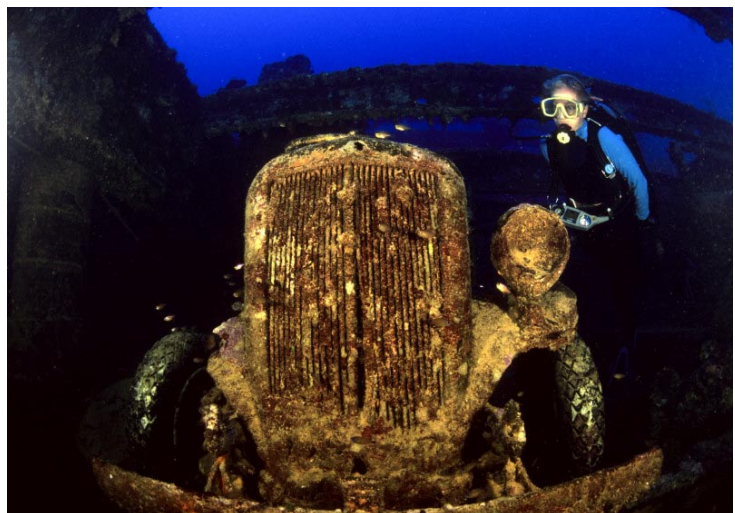
harbour. It's not surprising then that America bore a huge grudge for this battleship. At the end of the war the Nagato was the only remaining battleship left in the Imperial fleet. As a final nail in the coffin it was raised from Tokyo Bay where it had sunk, and sailed to Bikini Atoll. Here it was subjected to 2 nuclear test blasts during Operation Crossroads and finally sunk on July 26, 1946.

Battleships are top-heavy causing them to flip over when submerged. The Nagato rests inverted with her 4 huge screws pointing toward the surface. It's a sombre dive on the bridge - this is where the war started for America, but it's the massive 16 inch guns that attract the most attention.



San Francisco Maru - Chuuk Lagoon, Micronesia

During World War II, Chuuk Lagoon (then known as Truk) served as the forward anchorage for the Japanese Imperial Fleet. Chuuk was considered the most formidable of all Japanese strongholds in the Pacific. On the various islands, the Japanese Civil Engineering Department and Naval





Construction Department had built roads, trenches, bunkers and caves. Five airstrips, seaplane bases, a torpedo boat station, submarine repair shops, a communications centre and a radar station were constructed. Protecting these various facilities were coastal defence guns and mortar emplacements. At anchor in the lagoon were the Japanese Navy's giant battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, tankers, cargo ships, tugboats, gunboats, minesweepers, landing craft, and submarines. Some have described it as Japan's equivalent of the Americans' Pearl Harbour.



Once the American forces captured the Marshall Islands, they used it as a base from which they launched an aircraft carrier attack on February 17, 1944 against Truk Lagoon. Operation Hailstone lasted for three days, with an American bombardment of the Japanese wiping out almost anything of value - Twelve Japanese warships, thirty-two merchant ships and 249 aircraft were destroyed.

Built in 1919, the San Francisco Maru served as a cargo ship during the war bringing raw materials to Japan from Palau, and later for transport between Japan and the supply bases in the Pacific. While at the Eten Anchorage at Chuuk Lagoon, she was attacked during the first day of the Operation Hailstorm air strikes. She sank the following day when a 500 lbs bomb dropped by a TBF Avenger launched from the aircraft carrier USS Essex hit amidships. Five crew were killed as a result of the bombing.



Today the San Francisco Maru is often referred to as the "million dollar wreck" - a reference to the value of the cargo of war supplies. She rests on the sandy bottom of the lagoon with the bottom of the bow at 63 metres. The foreship presents a fascinating and unique sight. There are three Japanese Type-95 "Ha-Go" light tanks parked on the main deck forward of the bridge. These were built by Mitsubishi and carried a crew of three. It had $\frac{1}{2}$ inch



armour and weighed 7.5 tons. Armament was one 10 mm main gun and two 7 mm machine guns. In hold two there are two trucks. Between the trucks there are two small tractors. There are more tractors underneath these tankers and tractors. Towards the bow in the forward hold one, you find hundreds of hemispherical anti-boat mines together with the detonator horns packed separately.

Fujikawa Maru - Chuuk Lagoon, Micronesia



The Fujikawa Maru was built in 1938 by Mitsubishi. Originally she was used by the ship's owners for liner service to North American ports on the Eastern Seaboard. She was taken over by the Imperial Navy in December 1940 and converted to an aircraft ferry. Semi-assembled planes were shipped in her hold from Japan to Chuuk Lagoon. There they were assembled on the island and made ready for warfare. Just before Operation Hailstone, the Fujikawa Maru had discharged 30 Jill torpedo bombers onto Eten airfield.

During the early phases of the War, America learnt the value of torpedoes launched from fighter aircraft. A bomb landing on a ship's deck can cripple a ship, but a torpedo exploding below the waterline will certainly destroy it. This was the fate of the Fujikawa Maru. She was hit by a single torpedo starboard amidships, while still at anchor. Slowly she sank landing almost perfectly on an even keel.



This wreck is an all-time classic and the most famous of the sunken fleet at Chuuk Lagoon. There are several Japanese Zeros in the second hold along with propellers, fuselages, engines and wings. Large-calibre bullets and gas masks litter the other holds. Most impressive is the engine room - down 3 flights of narrow stairs, with an



electrical shop that looks like it was used yesterday. Watch out for the air compressor affectionately known as "R2-D2".

USAT Liberty Glo - Bali, Indonesia



This steam-driven cargo ship was built in 1918 as a cargo ship. For the war effort she was armed with two guns and sent to carry cargo between Australia and the Philippines. On January 11, 1942 she was torpedoed by Japanese submarine I-166 15 Kilometres southwest of Lombok while carrying a cargo of railway parts and rubber. U.S. destroyer USS Paul

Jones and Dutch destroyer HNLMS Van Ghent took the damaged ship in tow attempting to reach Singaraja, the Dutch port and administrative centre for the Lesser Sunda Islands, on the north coast of Bali. However she was taking too much water and so was beached on the eastern shore of Bali at Tulamben so that the cargo and fittings could be salvaged.



Over the years anything salvageable was removed. Here she remained until 1963 when the tremors associated with the eruption of Mount Agung caused the vessel to slip off the beach coming to rest in 30 metres of water. She is now Bali's most popular dive site. The wreck is broken up, but guns, toilets, boilers, anchor chain, and other features are clearly visible. It is encrusted with coral and sea life and a popular spot for photography and night diving. This is an easy shore dive with excellent fish life.





Mitsubishi Zero - Kimbe Bay, Papua New Guinea



The Japanese Zero was probably the most outstanding plane in the Pacific theatre. Early in the war, nothing could out-turn and out-speed the Zero. Although matched, and later outclassed by US fighters, it still represented a formidable weapon. The reason it performed below par in the later years was that it was manned by pilots who lacked experience, training and the skill of the early aces. Up to the Battle of Midway, the Zero dominated the skies. Yet, it was this battle that the losses of aircraft, pilots and carriers struck the heavy blow from which the air-arm of the Imperial Japanese Navy could never recover.



The Zero was responsible for destroying at least 1,550 American aircraft between 1941 and 1945. Never substantially updated or replaced, the Zero remained the Imperial Japanese Navy's primary fighter throughout the war. With the arrival of new Allied fighters, such as the F6F Hellcat and F4U Corsair, the Zero was quickly eclipsed. Faced with superior opposition and a dwindling supply

of trained pilots, the Zero saw its kill ratio drop from 1:1 to over 1:10.

The Zero at Walindi was flown by Honda Tomiharu out of Rabaul, the biggest and most significant Japanese base in the South West Pacific. On the 26th December 1943 it partook in a major air battle to defend Cape Gloucester on the western coast of New Britain Island. Returning to Rabaul, it is suspected that the Zero ran out of fuel. The pilot was faced with the choice of trying to fly across Kimbe Bay and possibly run out of fuel before he made Hoskins Airfield. Instead he ditched the Zero in the very protected and calm water waters





of Kimbe Bay. It is found only 50 metres away from the shore and is in perfect condition.

Travel Contact:

B17 Blackjack: <http://www.telitadive.com>

USS Saratoga & Nagato: <http://www.bikiniatoll.com>

San Francisco Maru & Fujikawa Maru: <http://www.expeditionfleet.com>

USAT Liberty Glo : <http://www.mimpi.com>

Mitsubishi Zero: <http://www.walindi.com>

For more underwater images and stories visit <http://www.PeterPinnock.com>

Further reading:

- "USS Saratoga (CV-3): An Illustrated History of the Legendary Aircraft Carrier 1927-1946" - John Fry
- "Ghost Fleet: The Sunken Ships of Bikini Atoll" - James P. Delgado
- "Ghosts of War In the South Pacific" - National Geographic April 1988
- "Black Jack's Last Mission" - Rod Peace (video)
- "Zero - Japans Legendary WWII Fighter: Combat and Development History of Japan's Legendary Mitsubishi A6M Zero Fighter" - Robert Mikesh
- "Hailstorm over Truk Lagoon" - Klaus Lindeman