



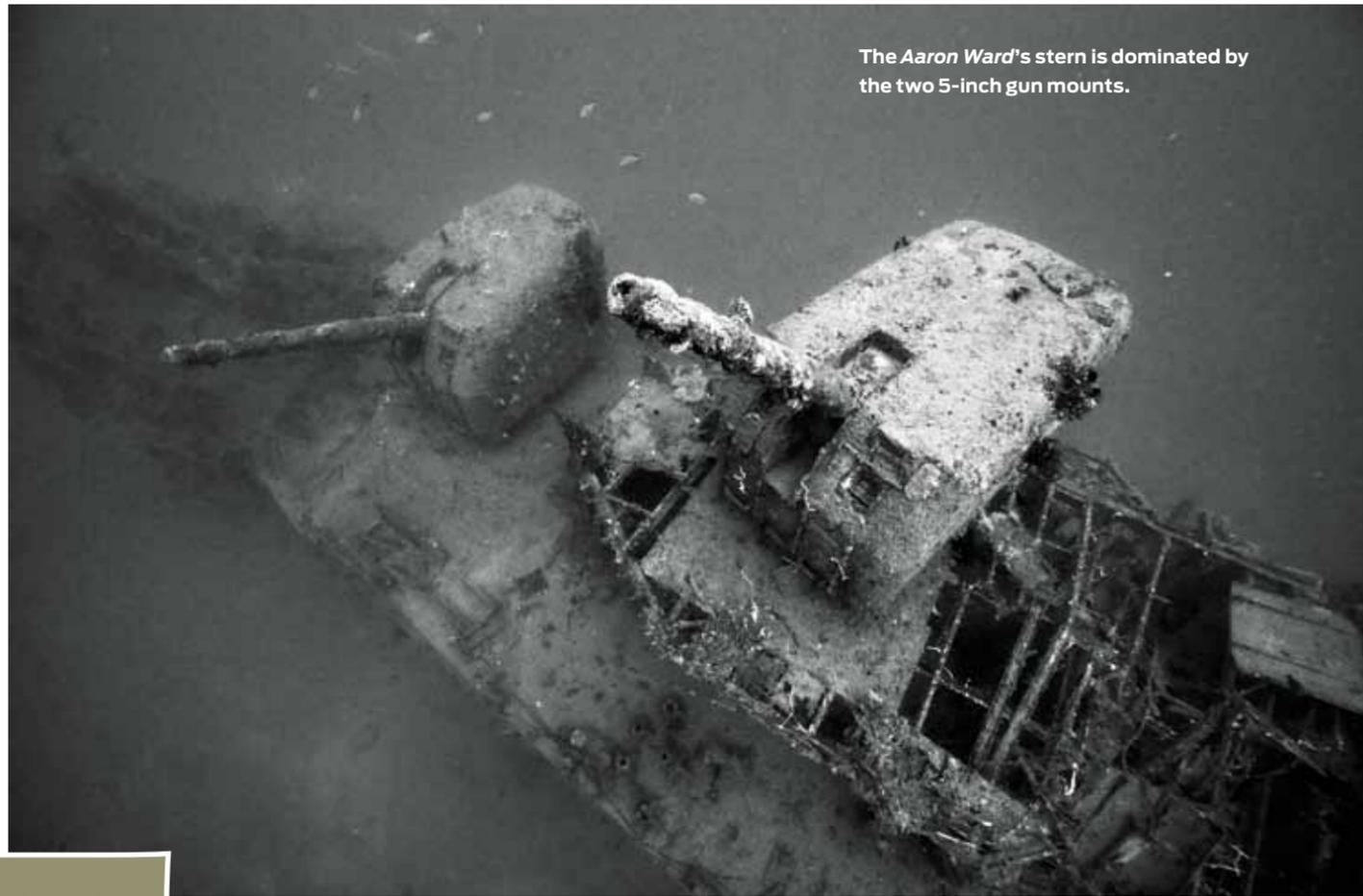
BETTER KNOWN FOR ITS MAGNIFICENT REEFS, THE SOLOMON ISLANDS HIDE THE BROKEN REMNANTS FROM SOME OF WORLD WAR II'S MOST FEROCIOUS NAVAL BATTLES

Divers descending to the *Aaron Ward's* stern are often overwhelmed at the sight of its two after gun turrets.

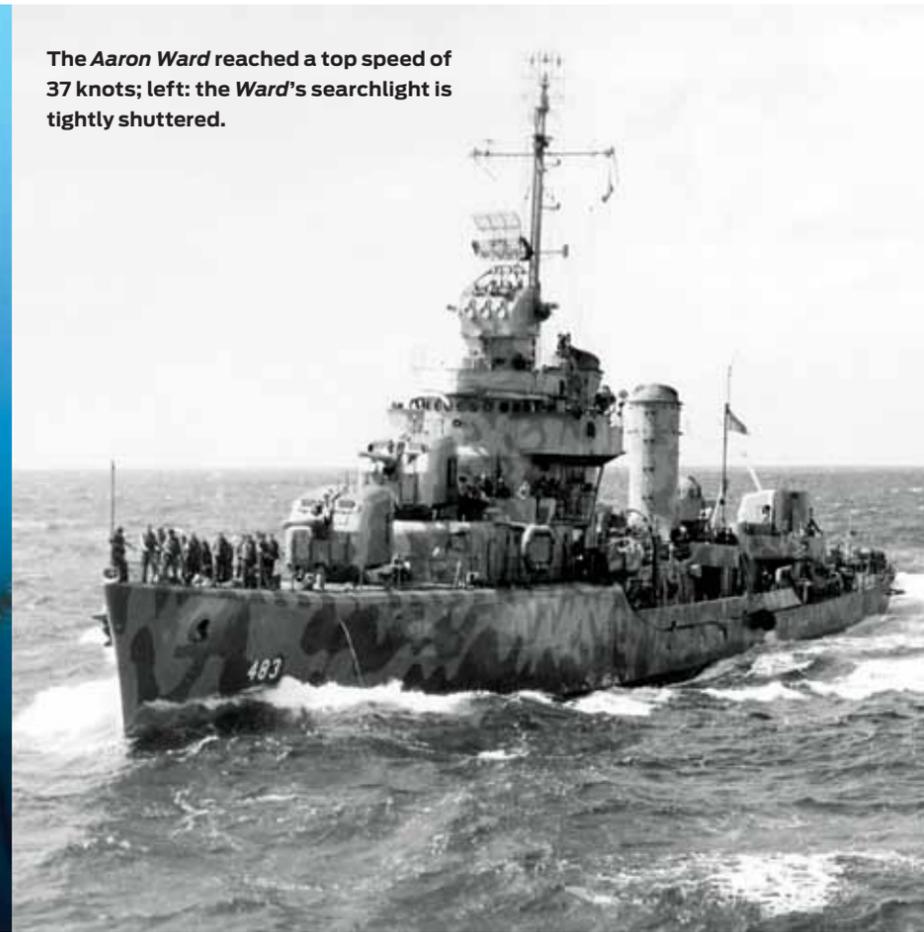
# Ghostly Guns *of* **IRON** **BOTTOM** **SOUND**

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRADLEY SHEARD

The *Aaron Ward's* stern is dominated by the two 5-inch gun mounts.



The *Aaron Ward* reached a top speed of 37 knots; left: the *Ward's* searchlight is tightly shuttered.



**T**he deeper I go, the more it feels like I'm free-falling through both space and time — 200 feet down and 63 years into the past, to a time when the world was in violent conflict. Nearing the bottom, I come face to muzzle with two ghostly 5-inch guns locked in an eternal struggle with the aircraft that sent the *USS Aaron Ward* to its grave. The massive guns appear ready to fire at any moment, lacking only muzzle flashes to awaken them from their slumber.

Dropping to the after deck, I swim around the ship's fantail, past empty depth-charge racks, then drop over the port side to the sand for a peek at one of the *Aaron Ward's* sculptured, high-speed screws. In life, the twin-screwed destroyer was a heavily armed speed demon capable of 37 knots; it was these propellers that had driven her. Ascending to the deck and continuing forward, I spot the starboard 40 mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun. Although the mount has collapsed, the twin barrels, gunner's seat and elevation wheel are clearly vis-

ible — it was here that men sat and faced the Japanese dive bombers during the *Aaron Ward's* final contest.

The entire panorama is like a battlefield frozen in time, lacking only the human participants who once fought for their lives and their ship. My heart pounds in my chest, adrenaline pumping, as I marvel at the scene laid bare before me. I feel like a time-traveling spectator in a combat zone that now lies silently hidden beneath the waves — it's like touching history.

Time is short at this depth and a long decompression already awaits, so the rest of this magical wreck will have to wait for another dive. I turn and head

aft, swimming slowly along the starboard gunwale. I pause, suspended in a deep, colorless ocean 200 feet beneath the surface, mesmerized by the sight of the two 5-inch turrets. Both guns point to starboard, each barrel at its own elevation, aimed at individual targets; the *Ward* is still poised for action after six decades on the sea bottom.

The *Aaron Ward* lured me halfway around the world to the island of Guadalcanal and a body of water so steeped in the history of World War II naval battles that its very name is synonymous with sunken ships. So many vessels were sunk in these waters that the sailors who lived through the sav-



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More than 50 ships were lost here during the war, but with depths in the Sound reaching more than 3,000 feet, most are beyond the reach of scuba divers. The shallow edges, however, hide plenty to capture divers' interest, as well as challenge their abilities: Japanese transports sunk right off the beach, floatplanes strafed by carrier aircraft during the invasion of the island, and Allied warships sent to the bottom by Japanese counterattacks, as well as yet-undiscovered wrecks.

Although I'd first heard of the *Aaron Ward* in 1996, it took me 10 years to get here. While the Solomon Islands are a popular recreational dive destination, I was unable to find an operator willing to take me to a deep shipwreck like the *Ward*, until I discovered Neil Yates' Tulagi Dive.

Yates first came here on holiday from Australia, dived the *Ward*, met his future wife, bought the business and built it into what is one of the top "technical" dive shops in the

Pacific. Fully equipped to support both open- and closed-circuit divers, he's personally made nearly 1,000 dives on the *Aaron Ward* alone, not to mention nearly a dozen other local war wrecks.

The shipwrecks found here are not purpose-sunk artificial reefs or merchantmen sunk in quick, one-sided carrier raids. Most of the ships in Iron Bottom Sound were front-line warships lost in savage gun and torpedo actions in the dark of night: Brilliant searchlights illuminated the enemy, high explosive shells sailed through the night, ships exploded, and men died by the hundreds in encounters that lasted only minutes.

The *Aaron Ward* was heavily damaged in one of these vicious battles in November 1942, absorbing nine direct hits, including 14-inch shells from a Japanese battleship. It managed to survive the contest and was quickly repaired and returned to service, only to fall victim to an aerial attack just two months after Japanese ground forces admitted defeat and abandoned Guadalcanal.

#### WHAT IT TAKES

If you have your heart set on diving the deeper wrecks, make arrangements in advance — the deeper wrecks require some technical training and gear, and prior experience at these depths is recommended. The *Aaron Ward's* main deck, for example, is at approximately 200 feet, with guns and superstructure a bit shallower. Nitrox is available for deco gas in side mounts; trimix is expensive, however, and requires 12 weeks' advance notice to ensure the availability of helium (which has to be shipped in), so most diving is done using air as a bottom mix. Both singles and twin sets are available for open-circuit divers, with support for rebreathers as well. The two Japanese transports in Honiara, the *Kinugawa Maru* and *Hirokawa Maru*, are dived from the beach, and can be enjoyed by both novices and advanced divers alike.



A diver hovers over the intact engine and propeller of the upside-down wing of a Japanese "Mavis" flying boat.

## 4 TIPS for Shooting the Wrecks of the Solomons

- 1 A diver in the distance can lend a sense of scale to wide-angle views, adding drama to the image.
- 2 These deep wrecks are generally dark and require high ISO settings to pick up ambient light. A pair of strobes with multiple manual power settings allows you to "dial down" the strobe's output and avoid over-exposure.
- 3 However, on days with good conditions, try shooting with just ambient light. There isn't much light at these depths, of course, so high ISOs are essential.
- 4 When using strobes, spread them wide, behind the lens plane and pointed straight forward (rather than angled inward) to minimize the effects of backscatter.



▲ **Want the Complete Package?**  
I shot a Canon 5D MkII in a Seacam housing, with two Subtronic Alph Pro strobes. A Canon 14mm lens gets super-wide angles that allow me to include a lot of history in each shot.

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*Brad Sheard (bradsheard.com) has been diving and photographing shipwrecks for more than 30 years, with a special interest in WW II wrecks.*



The massive engine of the *Kinugawa Maru* still sticks above the waves.



The *Hirokawa Maru* is the more intact of two beached transports at Guadalcanal.



The naval, land and air battles that took place around Guadalcanal are legendary in the history of WWII. Guadalcanal's strategic significance lay in a small airfield begun by the Japanese, and considered so dangerous to the supply lines between America and Australia that it warranted almost immediate invasion.

On Aug. 7, 1942, 19,000 U.S. Marines easily took Guadalcanal and the surrounding islands during Operation Watchtower. Two nights later, a brief but deadly naval encounter sent the four Allied cruisers *Canberra*, *Vincennes*, *Quincy* and *Astoria* to the bottom. This

stunning naval defeat prompted the U.S. Navy to withdraw its warships and the half-unloaded transports, leaving the Marines behind, short on supplies, to finish and hold the airfield, which was completed only 10 days after the invasion.

Three days later, the first Marine Corps fighter aircraft — the seeds of what became known as the Cactus Airforce — arrived at the newly anointed Henderson Field, named after one of the air heroes killed in the Battle of Midway two months earlier. What ensued was a bloody, six-month struggle between opposing land forces in a dank, malaria-infested jungle, fierce air battles between defending fighters and attacking bombers,

all punctuated by intermittent but ferocious naval actions that left scores of broken ships hidden beneath tropical seas.

In the coming days, I manage to explore a half-dozen more casualties of the brutal fighting that took place. Two Japanese transports, *Kinugawa Maru* and *Hirokawa Maru*, were run onto the Guadalcanal beaches in the dead of night to resupply Japanese ground forces; at dawn, they were discovered by the Cactus Airforce and bombed into the depths. Today, the bows of both ships lie nearly on the beach, while their sterns sit in 85 and 190 feet of water, respectively. Both wrecks lie on the edge of a coconut grove and are dived from the beach.

One drizzly afternoon I get a chance to explore the *Hirokawa Maru*, the deeper and better preserved of the two transports. Walking into the water from the sandy beach, wearing twin tanks and donning fins in the shallows, feels alien after a week of diving the deeper wrecks by boat. Swimming quickly into the depths along the steeply sloping hull, I reach the ship's intact fantail, lying on its port side at 190 feet. Dropping to the

sand, I find a heavily encrusted deck gun pointing to starboard. Unlike the guns on the *Aaron Ward*, however, this cannon appears static and lifeless, as if its spirit had died long ago. The gun proved useless in defending the *Hirokawa* against the onslaught of the Cactus Airforce, whose planes bombed and strafed the ship for hours, leaving it a billowing inferno at the edge of the sea.

Leaving the stern behind, I begin my ascent. On this dive the ascent is not vertical, however, but a slow swim up the inclined hull toward the bow and the beach, marking the midpoint of the dive rather than its end. Along the way I explore empty, cavernous cargo holds. Each is a maze of structural beams, subdividing a gloomy darkness into tiny pockets of lightless space, once filled with desperately needed ammunition and supplies for starving Japanese soldiers locked in a losing battle. In the deeper holds, strangely twisted wire corals hang from overhead beams like tangled spaghetti, while finely filigreed coral bushes envelop deck fixtures, cloaking their form in a thicket of white.

#### NEED TO KNOW

► **When to Go** The best seasons are April through early June, and mid-October to late December.

► **Diving Conditions** Water temp is 86 degrees F year-round. Visibility is 60 to 100-plus feet, but varies with currents and the dive site.

► **Operator** Based in the capital, Honiara, Neil Yates' Tulagi Dive ([tulagidive.com](http://tulagidive.com)) can take you to the deeper wrecks, including the *Aaron Ward*, as well as the shallower sites. You can also dive the wrecks from two of the world's most well-regarded live-aboards, the *Bilikiki* and *Spirit of Solomons* ([bilikiki.com](http://bilikiki.com)).

► **Price Tag** Eating and drinking in the Solomons is reasonable — beer will cost \$2 a bottle; a full meal is \$20. With Tulagi Dive, a two-tank day to the *Ward* and a shallower wreck is \$240. Dives to the *Kinugawa Maru* and *Hirokawa Maru* are \$50. Seven-night trips on the *Bilikiki* start at \$2,716 and increase in price for more nights.

Farther forward, giant H-shaped masts, once used to load supplies, jut out horizontally from the ship's deck like fallen goal posts. As the depth grows steadily shallower, the hull begins to crumble and lose form. But as its structure disappears, it gains brilliance, for the shallows bring light, and with it life. Thick, rich coral has transformed a collapsing, rusting remnant of war into a living, breathing being.

Sitting in Honiara days later, I gaze across Iron Bottom Sound, reflecting on my dives of the past nine days. A teeming afternoon rain has just ended, and the water's surface is oily calm, marred only by the circular ripples left by the last few raindrops, while storm clouds still march steadily across the sea. I drift off into a dream world, my mind immersed in stories of combat I've only read about, and sunken battlefields I've now visited firsthand.

Suddenly, a brilliant flash of light breaks the darkening twilight. The low-lying hulk of Savo Island stands out starkly on the horizon, as the sky momentarily glows in brilliant gray relief. Seconds later, deep rumbling thunder rolls across the sea as the luminous afterglow fades from the sky. Is there a lightning storm out there, or is it the sound of gunfire between great warships? There — another flash of light, and the sky is on fire again: a lingering, unnatural incandescence that illuminates the scene of battle.

I can almost see the Japanese cruisers, racing ahead at 26 knots, bearing down on the unknowing Allied cruiser force. Muzzles flash and 8-inch high-explosive shells rain down upon the American and Australian warships, while long lance torpedoes knife through the sea in a deadly fusillade. As the Japanese warships round Savo Island and speed off into the night, they leave behind an ebony gloom punctuated only by the glow of burning ships, all that remains to mark one of the worst Allied naval defeats of the war.

As the lightning fades and silence descends, I sit transfixed, unsure of what I've witnessed. I feel like I've awakened from a vivid yet implausible dream that my rational mind refuses to dismiss. And burned into my brain forever is the image of the *Aaron Ward's* guns, an apparition that will haunt me for years, creating a visual manifestation of the sirens of legend whose call will be answered only by returning to see the *Ward* once again. **SD**



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