

SOL 19-1 More Phantoms, Politics and
New Friendships.

Executive Summary.

An expanded SEALARK team headed back to the Solomon's in May 2019. Ewan and Matt were joined by Dave Moran as the diving supervisor, Mark Roche and Ewan's son, Mack. Mark Roche's interest in the search and discovery of MIA aircraft was ignited when in 2008 he happened on the remains of LT(JG) I.E. RINKS, USNR on what we commonly known as the 'Boroko WILDCAT' (a Grumman F4F-4 WILDCAT fighter) this led to a protracted mission to repatriate the remains and see LT(JG) RINKS given the funeral he deserved. The aims of SOL 19-1 were to ground truth SEALARK's Wreck Diving Map of Munda, conduct Side Scan Sonar (SSS) work in several likely areas both in Munda and Vella Lavella and chase several potential leads including Unexploded Ordnance (UXO). In total SEALARK conducted approx. 22 hrs. of SSS work with the only real discovery being an upside-down vehicle. Despite no major new finds, SEALARK have a few leads that require a follow up trip and the team managed to document 12 aircraft and 3 Ships.

The Mission.

Day 1.



After a night where the team had differing sleep results depending on their distance from the Karaoke bar, the team headed out. The first trip was to an early bird cage model F4U-1 CORSAIR. Visibility was better than expected for this shallow dive (9m). Soon after we headed to dive a Japanese NELL Bomber near the end of the airfield. After some challenges in locating, we switched to the very shallow (3m) WILDCAT. There is not much left, but as time passes it is still important to make a detailed record of it. In the afternoon we headed to a UXO site on a lagoon edge.

Figure 1. F4U-1 CORSAIR. Photo Ewan Stevenson.

Day 2.

The team joined by Dive Munda headed to Blakett Strait via the Diamond Narrows for the first dive of the day. A A6M2 Model 21 ZERO Manufacture Number 5455 Presentation Number 1049 sits in 17m of water with the wings under silt and just the fuselage protruding from the seabed. Ewan and Dive Munda headed down first to photograph the ZERO, the rest of the team joined soon after.



Figure 2. The A6M2 Model 21 ZERO in Blakett Strait. Photo Ewan Stevenson.

After diving the ZERO, the team headed to Boroko Harbour. The next dive was the 654-ton freighter, the KASI MARU. Part of this dive was the laying of a commemorative plaque acknowledging the loss of life on both sides of WWII.



Figure 3. The KASI MARU. Photo Ewan Stevenson.

After a surface interval, Sealark and Dive Munda headed to a WILDCAT off Boroko Harbour. This was a special plaque laying as it was Mark Roche who had in 2008, located the remains of LT(JG) I.E. RINKS, USNR and who had overseen his repatriation back to the USA.



Figure 4. The Boroko WILDCAT. Photo Ewan Stevenson.

Day 3.

Saw the team head over to Rendova Harbour to once again dive and lay a plaque on LT(JG) James 'Jim' Doherty's SBD DAUNTLESS. SEALARK had planned and prepared a service to scatter Jim's ashes on site, but unfortunately his ashes did not arrive in NZ in time.



Figure 5. Belinda Botha from Dive Munda diving the SBD DAUNTLESS. Photo Ewan Stevenson.

A poignant dive on an intact aircraft in 14m of water. The team stopped at nearby Lumbari Island, the home of a WWII PT Base (incl. LT John F Kennedy (PT109)), the next dive was on a P39 AIRACOBRA in 28m of water. Sitting on white sand, the visibility was a good 25m.

Figure 6. P39 AIRACOBRA. Photo Ewan Stevenson.

Day 4.

Ewan and Dave heading out early with Dive Munda to dive another CORSAIR. Matt Wray spent the morning setting up the SSS, (courtesy of Discovery Marine Limited). The CORSAIR was completely intact apart from the propeller blades which had evidently sheared off during the water landing. The CORSAIR sits in 53m of water. After that dive, we

headed to a rumored aircraft that hadn't been dived for 20 years due to politics. Some time was spent snorkeling to pinpoint the site in murky lagoon waters locating it. Standard routine was followed with Ewan heading down first to conduct an archaeological record the site before the rest of the team joined him. A close study by SEALARK identified what was a very intact and rare Japanese VAL Dive bomber upside down on a coral ledge at 10m.





Figure 7. One of the fixed undercarriage wheels of the Val Dive Bomber. Photo Ewan Stevenson.

Early afternoon we headed back past the Diamond Narrows, past Noro to use the SSS to locate a plane that had been reported to have been raised off the seabed by a modern Ship's anchor, but due to the weight was cut loose again. After 1.5hrs of searching, we had not located it. On further investigation, we were informed that the actual boat that had attempted to do this was still actually in Noro.

Unfortunately, it was a different crew, as this had occurred 30 years ago. We lowered the SSS again as we transited the Diamond Narrows to see it, we could locate a reported AIRACOBRA. With no progress we headed back to Munda.

Day 5.

Sealark once again transited to Rendova Harbour. Once there we commenced an intensive SSS Search of an area that had been previously identified (2015) by Ewan whilst on a mission for the Department of POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA). Ewan had interviewed a local who had reported seeing an aircraft on the side of a reef. After 1.5hrs of searching, a tail like shadow appeared. We dropped a buoy on the target. Two team members dropped onto the target, but unfortunately the target was rock. To help narrow down the area, we decided to head to Ugheli village and find the witness, so the team headed to the east side of Rendova. After several attempts he was located in Munda. Once there, the villagers told us he had moved to a Village that we had just pasted.

Day 6.

Was a return trip to Rendova Harbour. With the witness with us, he directed us to where he remembered where the plane was. We put half the team into the water to snorkel and Ewan and Matt got the SSS out. Despite nearly 3 hrs. searching, we could not locate the aircraft. Our contact promised to keep working on the location and would buoy it for us. We then returned him to his village and took the opportunity to observe a B17E Flying Fortress the site that was close by.



Figure 8. An identifying piece of the B17E.

The B17E had exploded on impact, with the wreckage spread far, wide and was entangled in the jungle. The team then reassessed the plan for the afternoon. It was decided to investigate a report of another plane in the further west. Utilising Ewan's pidgin skills, we could not negotiate approval to investigate the site. There was a nearby that we could investigate. A plane in very shallow water. After much searching in murky water, we managed to locate it. It was a very damaged wreck that we managed to identify as a US aircraft only after finding some .50 Cal ammo in the sand around it.



Figure 9. .50 Cal.

Day 7.

Ewan and Matt resumed SSS, this time off the west end of Munda Airfield. With only limited success, Ewan re-visited the WILDCAT alone to get a photographic/video record. An important dive after all as Ewan identified the plane as a HELLCAT, not a WILDCAT as previously thought.

In the afternoon, Matt cleaned and packed the ready for transportation, whilst the remainder headed back to Boroko to investigate a reported aircraft on land.

Day 8.

The team departed Munda via the Diamond Narrows and Blackett Strait to a Grumman HELLCAT site close to Ferguson Passage. A great dive in good visibility on a very intact HELLCAT.



Figure 10. HELLCAT.

We then transited to Gizo to drop off the cylinders at Dive Gizo, before the next leg of the journey to Vella Lavella, and Yawana Dive at Rochelle

Day 9.

Sealark headed away in two boats. The SSS boat, a 15Hp one for Ewan and Matt and the 40Hp for the remainder. We were following some research for downed planes and we commenced searching, by SSS and diver once in the area. With no luck by lunchtime, we met up with the local village chiefs, who whilst interested in what we were doing, could offer no more information. It was a similar story in the afternoon.

Day 10.

Another day of SSS and diving in a couple of areas, but a new weather phenomenon started to become common. By lunchtime the storm clouds had built up and torrential downpours would commence after 1200. Whilst the SSS is controlled by a Panasonic Toughbook, there is still a fair bit of electrical string was exposed and vulnerable and Matt was protective of. So, the first spits of rain and the SSS was packed away. On Day 10, we utilised the arrival of the rain to explore one of Dive Yawana's dive sites, the remains of a ZERO and a lugger in shallow water. After a good explore, we headed back to Yawana.



Figure 11. ZERO.



Day 11.

Another day of searching that did not result in any positive leads.

Figure 12. Lugger Anchor.

Day 12.

Another frustrating day searching. It was decided to break off the search and record another lugger, this time with a completely intact propeller. In the after, most of the team headed up to visit the site a R4D-5 SKYTRAIN site.



Figure 13. Intact prop.



Figure 14. The national insignia on the port wing of the R4D-5 SKYTRAIN.

Day 13.

No SSS due to weather. The dive gear was loaded up and the team and headed around to Barakoma and dove the heavily damaged remains of a CORSAIR that had been previously found by Andrew and Tim. We then conducted a search dive off the end of the WWII airstrip.

Unfortunately, there was no contacts of interest.

Figure 15. CORSAIR remains of Barakoma.



Day 14.

The team packed up and conducted a 3-hour return boat trip back to Munda in order to catch the flight back to Brisbane.