

Trip Report: Tulagi, Soloman Islands, 6-13th September 2009

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Nemo in Critical Condition

There are fears for the mental health of Nemo as he displays the symptoms of a broken heart. Following years of dedication, in just one solitary week all interest in Nemo has been pushed aside. Yes, it's true – Cas has turned Techie...! She has the Lust for Rust. Whether the picture below is responsible for her abrupt change of heart, I'd hate to say but she did smile a lot on the dives...



It started as these things do, with just one side slung “for safety”. She was heard to say that she “just needed the one” and “it’s just for back-up”. Neil gave her the first tank for free, she thought she could handle it. But it’s the age old story, before she knew it, one just didn’t give her the same hit so she had two cylinders, then three... They were professional, and worked in pairs - Jeff gave her the fifth and final cylinder. She ended up staying for extra deco just to get that last hit. The last I saw of her, she’d let go of the deco line and had started slipping back down to the depths of the Aaron Ward. A sad, sad story.

I am of course talking about our trip to the Solomons to dive the wrecks of Tulagi. It took a 3.30am start and 7 hours of flying plus transit time in Brisbane but it’s definitely worth it. We arrived in Honiara at 2.30 local time, very tired and very hot, and were met by Neil, the owner of Tulagi Dive. A short drive took us to the Honiara yacht club where we met with Bev and Jeff and after a quick Sol Brew – the local Solomon’s beer – we boarded the dive boat for the 1½ hour trip to Tulagi. The weather wasn’t the best so I wrapped myself up in my waterproof coat and decided upon the “dry but sore bum” option and sat myself up near the bow on the leeward side. Bryan took the “wet but I love it” option and sat on the windward side of the boat and got, well, wet and grinned like an idiot for the entire trip.. Cas went somewhere inbetween.

On arrival at the Vinata Lodge adjacent to the dive shop, we were met by the smiling face of Moi who manages the lodge and were given our flower garlands to welcome us. As we were shown to our rooms, we decided that we’d freshen up with a nice hot shower then retire to the bar for a cool gin and tonic while we perused the menu for an early dinner. Well, that showed how little we knew! Hot water is apparently a luxury in the Solomons so cold showers it was all week and dinner was a communal event taking place at 7pm every night. The lodge was definitely basic but you quickly adapt and it covered everything we needed for a diving trip – ie friendly staff, a bed to sleep in and a boat



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moored close by! Over another cold Sol Brew, we chatted to Peter, the final member of our dive group who was back in Tulagi for his 6th or 7th trip to the wrecks. As Bev and Jeff were friends of Neil's and regularly spent a month or so a year out there, we were definitely the rookies of the group.

After a tasty dinner of rice, sweet potato, mince and crabs, Cas's yawning got the better of us and we were all tucked up in bed before 8pm. Whilst I'd love to say that this was due to our early start and the travelling, this was about the same time as we went to bed every night! Too much nitrogen is my excuse..

After a breakfast of toast, pikelets and fruit, our first dive was a warm up dive, as is normal on a dive trip. However, this "warm up" dive had a maximum depth of 36m, a bit deeper than usual! We were diving on the HMNZS Moa which Bryan was particularly keen to dive on due to the history behind it – there's very few other New Zealand boats lost in action that can be dived on. The boat journey was barely worth switching the engines on for and as Cas commented, it was not far off her normal surface swim back to the boat with her navigation! As it was so close to the shore, the visibility wasn't the best at about 8-10m but she is a nice size ship to get a good feel of on a dive. The bow section has disappeared completely in the sand and it's a very odd sensation to be swimming along the deck then come along this completely smooth transition into sand.



Our afternoon dive was on the USS Kanawha and a nice shallow second dive with a maximum depth of 45m... Yup, it's all deep out here! Our narcosis test was to see whether we noticed which of the letters was missing from the name at the stern. I was narced enough to not remember how to spell Kanawha, but fortunately not narced enough to spend the entire dive trying to work it out. Bryan's response upon surfacing was "what letters?".

The second day was back to the Kanawha to dive the bow section. At this point, Cas had started her slippery slope to techie diving and descended with her stage cylinder and – wait for it – without her camera! I don't know whether this new piece of equipment distracted her concentration or she didn't know quite what to do without a camera in her hand, but I had the most amusing dive I've had for quite a while just watching her. Upon reaching the deck, Cas promptly took off at a million miles an hour in the completely opposite direction to the rest of us. I waited to see whether she'd notice but when it was obvious she hadn't, I flashed my light at her. She turned around but without giving any indication that she's noticed this or acknowledging anyone, she continued to swim at the same speed but in the correct direction at least. We all made our way down the starboard side of the deck while Cas raced down the port side, again not acknowledging anything. Neil stopped to show us the scarab of a sword and we watched her swim away in the distance. As he banged his knife on the cylinder, again she turned straight round but almost on autopilot without indicating any acknowledgement. She swam straight for Neil, grabbed the scarab while continuing to fin, swam in a loop, came back and dropped in straight into my hands while swimming at 60mph. I realised that I was obviously pretty narced as well as I had to hold the regulator in my mouth for the next 5 mins just giggling at her, it was just so uncharacteristic of her to swim around at that speed with no awareness of her surroundings. When I commented on it afterwards, she tried to pass it off as having to continuously fin as she was negatively buoyant with the extra cylinder. When I pointed it out to her that it was an ali cylinder which is more or less neutrally buoyant, plus

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why did it not occur to her to put some air in her BC, she couldn't really reply...! Yes, narcosis does affect us all!

That afternoon we opted to do a reef dive and went to twin tunnels, a very pretty site. It consisted of two vertical shafts in the reef leading from approx 15m down to 36m. The shafts are full of sea fans and beautiful coral and are very pretty. Coming out on the wall at 36m, there are schools of tropical fish around so we just slowly made our way back up to the top of the reef and sat and watched them. We saw a couple of black tips swim past and as this was only the second time Bryan had ever seen sharks in several hundred dives, he was very happy.



The third day arrived and we were onto the main attraction of Tulagi – the USS Aaron Ward, the only diveable US Navy destroyer lost in action. She sits completely upright in over 70m of water with the deck at approx 55m. A 15min bottom time requires about an hour ascent time – so plenty of deco time but I came prepared. Being the queen of narcosis as I am, I took it very slowly but was pleasantly surprised how aware I was of the surroundings, although when I checked my air after a few mins and still had 220 bar, it took me a few seconds to realise that no, I didn't have incredible air consumption, simply that my manifold was switched off! The visibility was pretty good with the deck came into view from about 40m and while the bridge had collapsed a couple of years ago, you could make out most of the defining features. While I love penetrating and seeing things close up, one of my favourite sights must be hanging as far away from the wreck as the visibility will allow and just taking in the fact that it is actually a ship, and not just bits of metal joined together. We settled down on the deck and made our way along the starboard side past the guns – still pointing to the sky to fend off the Japanese air raid – and along to the bow. I wanted to do my Titanic impression – okay, so I was a bit narced – but unfortunately couldn't find Leonardo anywhere. I was even aware enough to point out a toaster and rice pot to Bryan who shrugged in a very dismissive manner! Apparently toasters are boring... Talk of telephones in the engine room are apparently interesting, but toasters not. A boy thing maybe? On our way back down the port side, Bryan and I dawdled a bit and fell behind Neil and Cas. As we got close to our 15min bottom time, Bryan signalled to start making our way back up and we swam up to regroup with Neil who was showing Cas the torpedo tubes, along with one of the torpedos that had actually been released from the tube and sat halfway out – pretty cool to see. We made our way back to the shotline and started our long ascent and deco stops. I waited until I was back up at 3m still with approx 30 mins of deco to do and then brought out my secret weapon, my book with the last 50 or so pages to read. It certainly makes the time pass a lot quicker and I even stayed down an extra 10 mins or so to finish the book off! Upon surfacing, I remarked my surprise at how much I could remember from the dive and that to check my narcosis, I'd counted the torpedo tubes and knew that there were 5 of them. "Torpedo tubes?" asked Bryan. "What torpedo tubes?" ... To be fair, I think he did turn back to the line just as we reached them, but don't tell him I said that!

We re-dived the Aaron Ward again the following day, the plan being to head down to the stern and see the propellers. Neil had gone over to Honiara to sort out some business so we went down with Shadrak.

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The guiding arrangements for the week were pleasantly casual, Neil and Shadrak essentially leading the way but it wasn't an issue if you wanted to split off and look at something else. So we jumped in the water with another loose arrangement that Shadrak would be leading the way for Cas while Bryan and I would follow along and see. We went down the line and landed on the torpedo tubes – Bryan definitely saw them this time! I could feel that I was more narced than yesterday. However, I was pleased to be coherent enough that when Shadrak indicated the way to the bow, I could confidently disagree and point the other way to show that we definitely wanted to do the stern this time. Shadrak seemed relatively insistent but I was just as insistent so after a few hand gestures back and forwards (of the polite nature), we headed off towards the stern. As we swam down, my natural narcosis paranoia set in and I realised quite how unlikely it was that I was actually correct and the guide would be wrong and sure enough I started "recognising" what we'd seen yesterday. Feeling terrible that I'd lead people back to the same dive as yesterday when we only had such a short dive time, I tried to indicate that I was wrong but it all just got too confusing as the others were already too far ahead. More paranoia set in so I swam around rather aimlessly and didn't go past the gun while the others made their way further along before turning back. I turned round and tried to go further ahead to at least see some of the new section of the wreck before starting my ascent from there and heading diagonally up to the shot line as opposed to return along the deck. This was fairly straightforward to me as I knew what I was doing but naturally wasn't quite so obvious to Bryan who was trying to keep an eye on me as all he could see was me swimming off in the distance at 60m with little dive time to go. The upshot was that as Bryan had gone a little bit deeper than me then taken an extra min or so to start the ascent, he ended up with an additional 30mins deco to do, and his entire run time for a 17mins bottom time was 113 mins! Fortunately I had my handy underwater notebook with me (shameless plug...) so we passed the time playing hangman. I spent the rest of the day feeling very bad that we'd done the same dive twice because of me but the others didn't seem too worried about it and didn't really mention anything. Later it transpired that I had actually been correct in the first place and that we did actually head down to the stern... Oops – damn that paranoia narcosis! All in all, not the best dive I'd done.

The following day, I declined to do the Aaron Ward again, as my narcosis at that depth simply means that I don't appreciate the wreck properly, especially with an hour's deco for a 15 min dive. Bryan and Cas were happy enough with this and keen to do the Moa again as Bryan really enjoyed the history of it and Cas had only had a short dive on it the first time with just a single. She was so keen to spend some time on it this time as she ended the dive with 5 extra cylinders... It was a great depth for me, allowing for a pleasant buzz of narcosis and allowed a good half an hour dive time with half an hour of deco.

We finished off the week's diving with a relaxing reef dive back at twin tunnels. The currents were quite strong so we hung around at the edge of the wall and did some shark spotting. It was pretty successful, with a couple of sightings of a black tip but only from the distance. Then a white tip came swimming slowly past, allowing us a good view of him. Then as the giant trevally rounded up a school of smaller reef fish, a grey reef shark joined in the chase and came darting through them. While he was only small, the fact that he was obviously feeding caused more than a little increase in my heart rate! Bryan ended the



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dive very happy with his shark sightings. Cas ended the dive on a slightly less flattering note. As she ascended from the wall, her breathing started getting harder and she noticed her SPG needle was fluctuating. Yes, any new open water student could probably hazard a guess what had happened but our experienced Dive Master was a bit unsure and signalled to Neil that there was a problem. After a few wiggles of the hand to try and explain what was happening, she ended up surfacing on Neil's octi. On the boat, she asked Neil what could be wrong with her gauge to make it fluctuate like that – he took one look at her and asked whether she's checked her air before jumping in. Sure enough, she'd gone diving with valve in the "turned off then half a turn back" position! As she said – a bit of a blond moment.



And so ended a fantastic week's diving. I'd definitely recommend anyone to go there, although my weakness for narcosis meant that I definitely didn't get the most out of the Aaron Ward. I'd like to thank Mike from Dive Fish Snow travel for organising the trip, and a very big thank you to Neil for making it a great trip, especially for going out of his way to show us around Honiara on our non diving day and returning the following day to take us to the airport.

And finally, time to confess – Cas still is in love with Nemo really. While she did take down one side slung cylinder on most of the dives, the 5 extra cylinders were "donated" to her once she'd finished the deco on the Moa for the photo opportunity.