

THE Ghosts OF Guadalcanal

The Cambrian Foundation's Guadalcanal Expedition '97

TERRENCE TYSALL (WITH KEVIN DENLAY)
PHOTOS BY MIRIA DENLAY

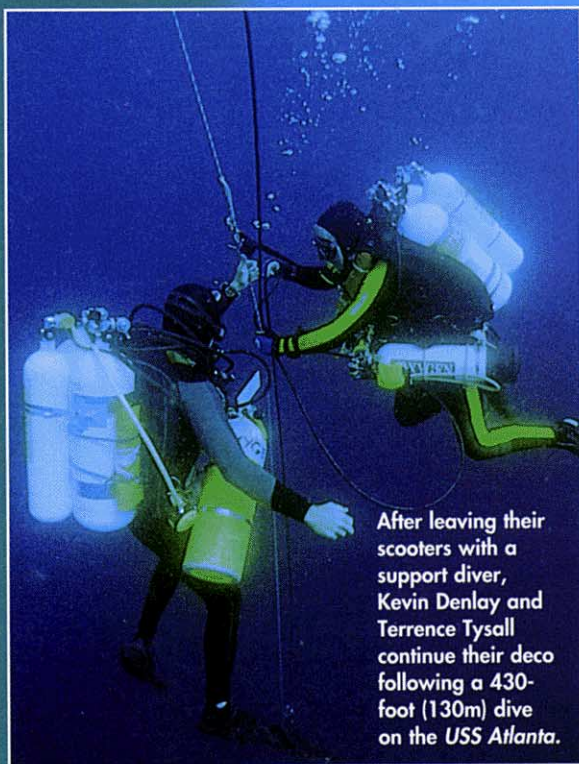
Friday the 13th, November 1942: 0148 hours. "Odd ships fire to starboard, even ships fire to port." This was the command that began one of the most murderous sea battles of modern times. United States Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan, on board the heavy cruiser *USS San Francisco* and overall commander of U.S. Naval Task Group 67.4, gave the command as the Japanese fleet loomed on both sides of his ships cruising in the waters off Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. Rear Admiral Norman Scott, his flag flying on the light cruiser *USS Atlanta*, acted immediately on this command. In the following hours the U.S. would lose both admirals, 1439 officers and men, as well as four destroyers and two light cruisers. To describe this sprawling and confused action would be futile. To get a picture of the battle it seems best to hear the description of the men who fought in it. They described it as, "a barroom brawl after the lights had been shot out." The heavily damaged Japanese task force was turned back, losing two destroyers and leaving the crippled battleship *Hiei* to be sunk by air attack later the same day. The task force's primary objective, shelling Guadalcanal's U.S.-held airfield in support of beleaguered Japanese army troops, had been soundly thwarted.

It is the ghosts of these epic battles that brings members of the Cambrian Foundation from around the world to visit and pay our respects to the fallen of both sides in an attempt to focus some attention on the area so that the unique history and culture of the region can be preserved. Many westerners are only familiar with the name of the Solomon Islands because it was the area in which John F. Kennedy served on *PT-109* during World War

II. The primary focus of my journey was to meet with the many persons required to help integrate the Cambrian Foundation's overall vision into the Solomon Islands National Museum and Cultural Center and specifically to talk with the officials that are the driving force behind these growing institutions. We very much want the Solomon Islanders themselves to gain a greater awareness of the maritime history that surrounds their home.

Guadalcanal is in the Solomon Island group between 5 and 10 degrees south latitude and 157 and 162 degrees east longitude. The islands that make up the Solomon chain are a double row of high continental peaks of a submerged mountain range that extends from New Guinea to New Zealand. The largest islands of the group are Choisuel, Guadalcanal, Malaita, New Georgia, San Cristobal, Santa Isabel and Rennell. The Solomon Islands celebrated their independence as a nation within the British Commonwealth on July 7, 1978. Volcanic origins and a continuously hot and humid climate produces a rich steamy jungle and rain forest. The natural history of the region is very diverse, both in the jungles and on the coral reefs. The Solomon Islands also have a rich cultural heritage as one of the oldest cultures on earth. The islands' modern economy is largely driven by the production of copra and coconut oil as well as extensive commercial fishing and the logging of tropical hardwoods. Tourism, particularly from divers, is an increasingly and ecologically friendly revenue source.

The diving activities conducted on this expedition were used to demon-



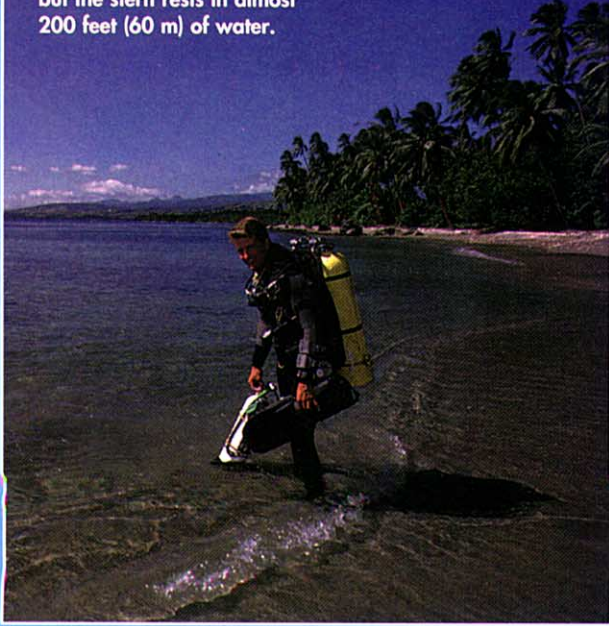
After leaving their scooters with a support diver, Kevin Denlay and Terrence Tysall continue their deco following a 430-foot (130m) dive on the *USS Atlanta*.

strate to the government of the Solomon Islands the feasibility of the proposed recovery of artifacts for display in the national museum. Recovery, that is, only if and when the required U.S. Navy permission has been granted. Although no artifacts whatsoever were or have ever been removed by the Cambrian team, never before seen digital video footage was shot of previously inaccessible areas on some wrecks, demonstrating to the government that the team's operating principles and mixed-gas techniques were sound.

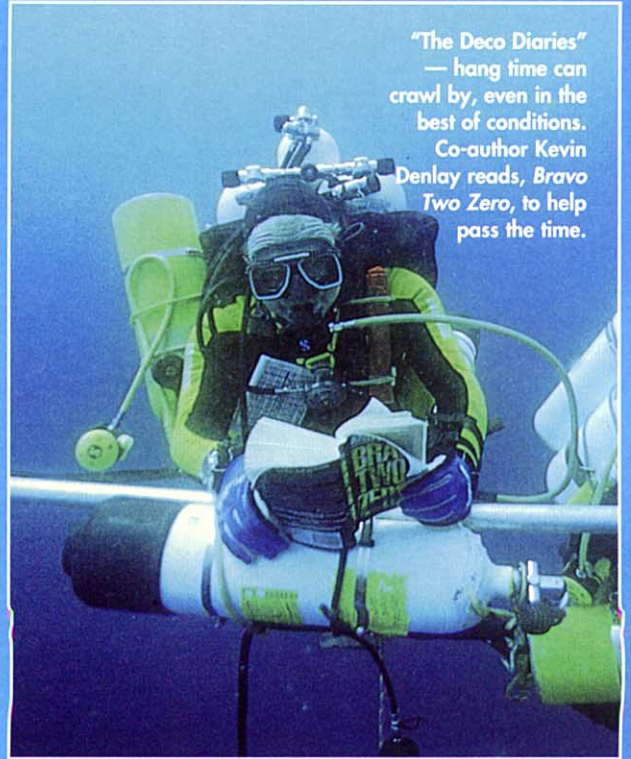
The all-important logistical piece of the puzzle was handled by the Expedition Leader of our *USS Atlanta - Guadalcanal - Solomons Project*, Kevin Denlay. With his wife Miria, and the backing of their company Alternate Diving Services, they managed to pull together everything required to conduct sustained mixed-gas dive operations in as remote an area as any on earth. Island Dive Services helped with some on-shore logistics and provided an insider's view of Guadalcanal for the expedition, as well as being the communications link between the field and the Foundation back in Florida. The liveboard dive vessel *MV Solomon Sea* was once again used as our mobile base and primary dive platform on this expedition.

On our first day available to dive after arriving, we wanted to pick a beautiful but rather benign site in

Author Terry Tysall about to dive the *Hirokawa Maru*. The wreck starts at the shoreline but the stern rests in almost 200 feet (60 m) of water.



"The Deco Diaries"
— hang time can
crawl by, even in the
best of conditions.
Co-author Kevin
Denlay reads, *Bravo
Two Zero*, to help
pass the time.

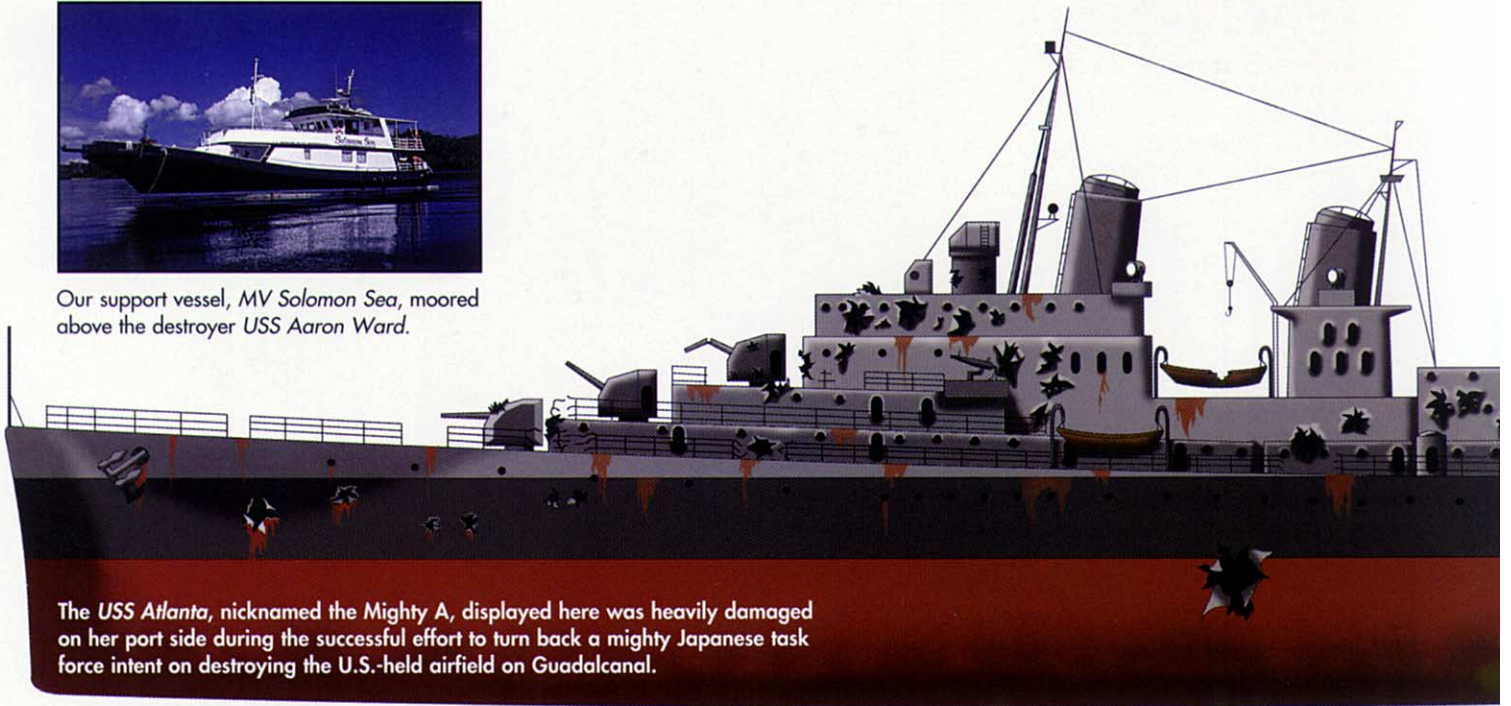


A Cambrian team
diver, Miria
Denlay, scooters
across a blast hole
in the hull of the
Hirokawa Maru,
one of "Tenacious"
Tanaka's large
beached transport
ships.





Our support vessel, MV Solomon Sea, moored above the destroyer USS Aaron Ward.



The USS Atlanta, nicknamed the Mighty A, displayed here was heavily damaged on her port side during the successful effort to turn back a mighty Japanese task force intent on destroying the U.S.-held airfield on Guadalcanal.

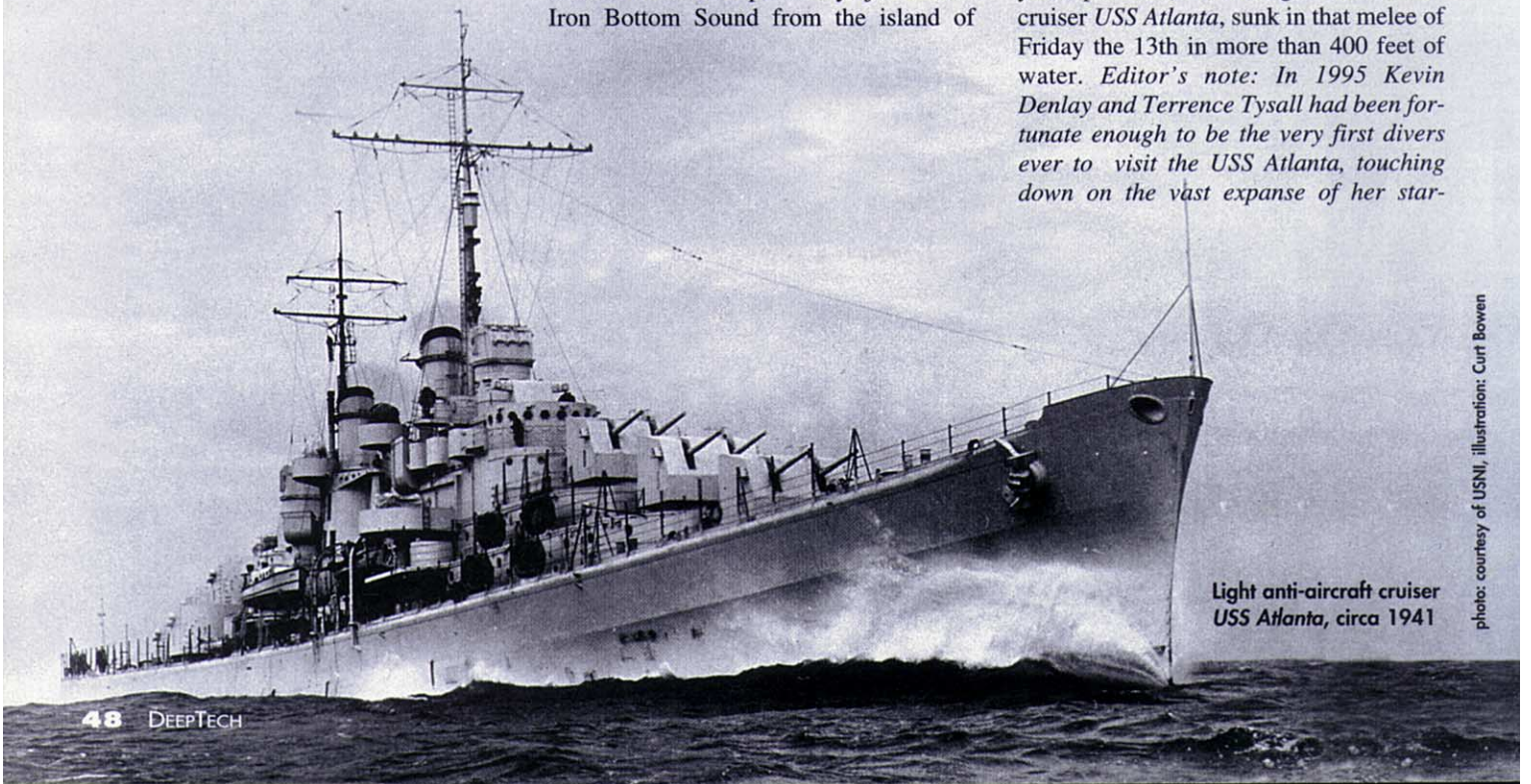
which we could answer some lingering equipment questions. We chose the *Hirokawa Maru*, a beach dive known locally as the Bonegi One. She is one of Admiral Raizo "Tenacious" Tanaka's large resupply transports that was intentionally run aground in a desperate attempt to support the starving Japanese troops on the island. This same admiral was later to remark, "There is no question that Japan's doom was sealed with the closing of the struggle for Guadalcanal." Now the *Hirokawa* is a beach dive that can end up in over 200 feet (60m) of water very quickly! The primary purpose

of our dive was an equipment shakedown after the long journey and to practice emergency drills, such as valve shut-downs, DPV (Diver Propulsion Vehicle) towing and gas sharing — skills that would have to be very sharp as we marched progressively deeper and stayed longer as the expedition continued.

The next day the video piece of the puzzle was introduced along with more camera work to hone our skills on one of the most stunning wrecks on the planet: the USS Aaron Ward. A destroyer sunk in battle and now resting upright in 240 feet (73m) of water near the island of Tulagi in the Florida Group, she lays just across Iron Bottom Sound from the island of

Guadalcanal. Everyone deserves to dive a wreck this incredible! To me she is everything that I pictured a wreck dive to be as a child. Upright, almost completely intact and teeming with fish, her guns are still frantically trained at the dive bombers that attacked and sank her.

In between the stream of meetings with officials and speaking engagements about the Cambrian Foundation and its projects, we managed three more days of diving the *Ward*. We kept lengthening our bottom times and honing our techniques for our deeper objective — a second visit (our initial dive on her was one-and-a-half years previous) to the light anti-aircraft cruiser USS Atlanta, sunk in that melee of Friday the 13th in more than 400 feet of water. *Editor's note: In 1995 Kevin Denlay and Terrence Tysall had been fortunate enough to be the very first divers ever to visit the USS Atlanta, touching down on the vast expanse of her star-*



Light anti-aircraft cruiser
USS Atlanta, circa 1941

photo: courtesy of USNI, illustration: Curt Bowen

The Mighty A

The 540-foot (165m) long *USS Atlanta* (Cruiser Light-51) was the first ship of her kind, a radically new design concept in what became known as the Atlanta Class Anti Aircraft Cruisers, and was the flagship of Rear Admiral Norman Scott on that fateful Friday in 1942.

Nicknamed "The Mighty A" by her faithful crew, she was tasked to provide an anti-aircraft defense screen for aircraft carriers at both the Battle of Midway and the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. Built for speed at the expense of heavy protective armor, she carried 16 5-inch guns in twin mountings, four quad 1.1-inch anti-aircraft guns, eight 20mm anti-aircraft guns, two quad 21-inch torpedo tubes and two depths charge racks.

In one of the two heaviest air attacks of the war against an American aircraft carrier the *Atlanta* had ample opportunity to show her stuff and perform in her principal air defense task. Then, in the early hours of Friday the 13th, November 1942 she found herself at the head of a cruiser column in a line made up of 13 ships in a hastily formed American task group (TG 67.4).

The *Atlanta* now found herself facing down a large contingent of an attacking Japanese task force that contained, in addition to 11 destroyers and a heavy cruiser, two battleships! Within 10 minutes the gallant *Atlanta*, a ship purposely built to fight planes, destroyers and submarines, had taken at least one destroyer-launched torpedo and 50 major caliber hits. Sadly, two full eight-inch salvos were mistakenly delivered by the *USS San Francisco* in a tragic example of friendly fire.

Her crew fought valiantly for almost 18 hours to save her but she had to be abandoned and scuttled the next evening, prior to the expected return of yet another Japanese task force. One hundred and seventy two officers and men of her crew died with her, including Rear Admiral Scott. Her gallant efforts and the three-day affair that became known as the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, are considered a turning point in the war.

For her short but glorious war service the *USS Atlanta* earned five battle stars and the prestigious Presidential Unit Citation, while Admiral Scott was awarded a (posthumous) Medal of Honor for his actions that night. The brass plaque that the Cambrian Foundation team replaced on the *Atlanta* reads:

"TO THE BRAVE MEN OF THE U.S.S. ATLANTA, CL-51. We come to honor and pay our respects, not to disturb or desecrate. We are privileged to visit and touch your grave with the utmost reverence, asking those that follow to preserve this spirit. May we learn from your struggle. May your battles never be forgotten. This is why we visit. Terrence N. Tysall and Kevin Denlay. 30th Nov. 1995." — Kevin Denlay



A stamp set, issued in 1992 by the Solomon Islands, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the first American counter offensive of WWII.



board side. The vivid impression that I still carry with me about that very first visit to the wreck in 1995 was one of incredible personal insignificance. In the half-light of 360 feet (110m) the hull stretched into oblivion on both sides of me. We busied ourselves with our assigned tasks, placing flags and a memorial plaque to the fallen crew and filming what our limited swimming range would allow. It was a privilege to be on the first dive team to visit this fallen combatant.

This year we hoped to accomplish a great deal more. The major goal was a complete bow to stern documentation of the wreck site using digital video and diver propulsion vehicles, as well as the placement of a more permanent brass memorial plaque to replace the plastic version from our '95 expedition. On our *Atlanta* dives for this expedition both divers rode Aquazep diver propulsion vehicles and carried their bottom mix of trimix 10/60 (10% oxygen, 60% helium, balance nitrogen) in double 120-cubic-foot (15L), back-mounted cylinders with a manifold. Another 55-cubic-foot (7L) cylinder of bottom mix was mounted piggy back on the former. Air, carried in a side-slung stage cylinder, was breathed on descent as a travel gas (and on return as the first deco gas) to approximately 200 feet (60m), where the switch was made to the 55-cubic-foot (7L) cylinder containing bottom mix. This was then breathed from for the rest of the descent, and then some, before swapping to the full 120-cubic-foot (15L) doubles.

Happiness is being at 410 feet (125m) and still having almost 240 cubic feet (6800L) of bottom mix at your disposal! We attached a super bright Australian manufactured See-Blitz strobe to the down line at about 380 feet (116m), which had hooked in just near the *Atlanta's* bridge, for a point of reference to this all important return line to the deco station. While light conditions at 410 feet (125m) were rather low, especially on the shaded superstructure side of the wreck, the visibility was exceptional, easily 100 feet (30m).

On the first dive of this expedition, after placing the brass plaque on the starboard hull below the bridge (the *Atlanta* lays on her port side) we scooted aft over the base of the first stack, and the debris field between it and the aft stack. Searchlight tubs and 20mm gun mounts were easily identifiable. A little further aft, the starboard quad torpedo tubes with their enclosed operator shield had separated from the deck and fallen down onto the aft super structure, below the rear gun director. The #5 waist dual five-inch gun mount, while still in place, is shattered. The official action report states that a Japanese shell had passed through the #4 waist mount on the port side, on through the superstructure and into the #5 mount before it exploded. Lying in the wreckage above and slightly aft was a very well preserved 1.1-inch quad anti-aircraft mount. Further aft the ship shows the signs of impacting the bottom and the destruction caused by the demolition



"Trusty steeds of the deep," the team's DPVs with front-mounted cameras and brass remembrance plaque.

charge that was placed here to scuttle her when the fight to save her was eventually lost.

Turning around at our predetermined time, near the stern, we slowly made our way back to the up line where our strobe blinked reassuringly. The maximum depth of this dive was 410 feet (125m) and our 20-minute bottom time had ended all too quickly, so we reluctantly started the ascent to our first deco stop at 220 feet (66m) and then spent the next three and a half hours or so drifting with the light current as we moved up to our free-floating deco station. One or more of our support divers, Miria Denlay, Denis Balczeniak or George Krueger, were always in attendance with backup deco gas, candy, bottled fresh water and books at the ready. Yes, with two hours or more of deco on the shallow stops — 30 feet (9m) and above — we reverted to reading novels to pass the time.

On the next *Atlanta* dive we arrived on the wreck at almost exactly the same spot as on the previous dive, the second precision placement of the down line courtesy of our skipper. This time we headed toward the bow, flying over the three forward dual 5-inch gun mounts that are set in tiers from just in front of the bridge leading forward. At the bow, at a depth of 430 feet (130m), an anchor chain stretches out into the distance on the sand, most likely the one Kevin had seen on his aborted solo dive the previous December. Scooting back at the level of the gun mounts we could see the havoc wrecked by the barrage of shells that deluged the *Atlanta* in the opening minutes of the

engagement on that "black" Friday. Over the years silt and sand have built up so much in this forward area that only one barrel in each of the first two twin 5 inch mounts is visible, the others are buried from view. Yet clearly visible is the #3 turret with its top peeled back as if by a can opener, mute testimony to the carnage wrought in this area near the bridge.

Proceeding back across the bridge where Rear Admiral Scott died in a deluge of shells, we came to the forward gun director and a debris field scattered around the rear of the bridge and forward funnel. While I filmed in this area Kevin scooted off to investigate the foremast that lay stretching off into the distance. Flying further aft we again crossed the second of her two funnels and came once more

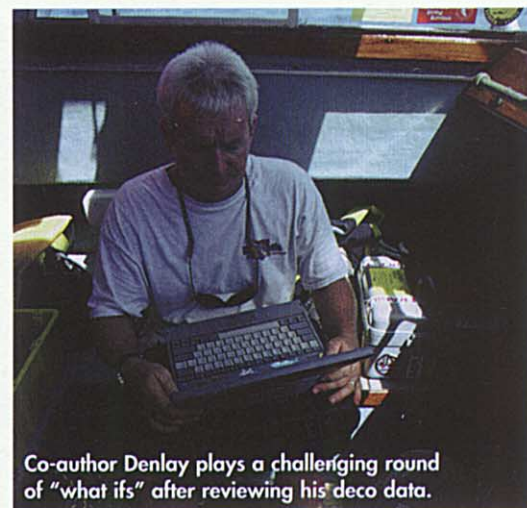
to the torpedo tubes and wrecked #5 waist mount. We turned the dive here as we wanted a closer look at the superstructure on the way back. Numerous shell and shrapnel holes punctuated what was once the thin protective skin of this beautiful cruiser, although most of the damage is on the port side, hidden from view. With a few minutes of our 20-minute bottom time left, Kevin took the opportunity to move the brass plaque from the hull up closer to the bridge. Considering the pounding the *Atlanta* took, as verified by the official action report, she is remarkably intact. It truly came home to us on this dive how important it is to protect these sites so we can all learn from the struggles of the past, and to help prevent them in the future.

Deco, as on the previous dive, was a relaxed affair with no unforeseen interruptions or problems thanks in part to the attention of the ever-present safety divers. Bottom mix on both dives was trimix 10/60, deco gas was air from the 200 foot (60m) stop, nitrox 40 from the 100 foot (30m) stop, nitrox 80 from the 30 foot (9m) stop and surface supplied oxygen available at 20 feet (6m), however this was primarily used as a "washout gas" for an extended period after the actual decompression profile had been fully completed. All gas, both bottom mix and deco (except the surface supplied oxygen) was diver carried throughout the dive, the safety divers only carried emergency back-up gas. We do not

subscribe to the theory of leaving our critical deco gas, or any back up, attached to down lines! Two of the commercially available decompression software programs were used throughout this expedition, I used a version of ProPlanner while Kevin ran the latest version of Voyager. Both programs had been individually configured by each diver and they produced very similar overall run times.

The Cambrian Foundation and Alternate Diving Services have already organized another return to the *USS Atlanta*, and other unique locations in the Solomon Islands, with a major series of expeditions scheduled for April/May of 1998. With terrestrial as well as underwater work projected, including virgin cave exploration, we hope to preserve and protect a little bit more of this precious planet. And it should be clearly noted that none of the Cambrian Foundation's plans in the Solomon Islands would have been possible without the help of our many sponsors. Certainly the most vital help we have received for the project to date would be from Alternate Diving Services of Tweed Heads, NSW, Australia. Additional thanks must also go to the many generous members of the Cambrian Foundation who came together to help us reach our goals, Ocean Management Systems USA, Island Dive Services and the cheerful crew of the *MV Solomon Sea*. **JD**

For more information on this or other Cambrian Foundation projects, or how you can be involved please visit our website at www.cfhq.com or call (407) 644-8446 or fax (407) 644-5820. Or email Terry Tysall at cambrian@sundial.net or Kevin Denlay at altdive@iaccess.com.au



Co-author Denlay plays a challenging round of "what ifs" after reviewing his deco data.

photo: Miria Denlay