

An underwater photograph showing a large, rusted metal structure, likely a shipwreck, covered in coral and marine life. The structure is on the left side of the frame. In the background, a diver is visible swimming towards the right. The water is clear and blue.

## Diving Wrecks & Caves With Agnes Milowka

**“Shipwrecks** – beautiful, awe inspiring, long forgotten chunks of metal lying on the ocean floor. Irresistible and fascinating not just because of their sheer aesthetic beauty but also because each one has a story. The demise and sinking of many was surrounded with tragedy and a high cost to human life, others were scuttled at the end of their useful working life.” [Agnes]

# Diving Airplane Wrecks

By Agnes Milowka

**D**iving on airplane wrecks is quite a strange and bizarre experience - aircraft belong up in the air and not underwater! Yet things don't always go according to plan, planes do crash and sometimes they end up at the bottom of the ocean. I have had the pleasure of diving on two sunken airplane wrecks in Australia, the Fairey Firefly in NSW and the Vultee Vengeance in Victoria.

The Fairey Firefly VX381 was a carrier borne anti-submarine torpedo bomber that was involved in a mid air collision, the Vultee Vengeance on the other hand was a dive bomber that crashed due to an engine failure. The two plane wreck sites couldn't be any more different from one another, but they do have one thing in common, they are both tiny dive sites that are notoriously difficult to locate. If your marks aren't spot on, locating something a mere twelve by fourteen meters across at the bottom of the ocean, is akin to the proverbial search for a needle in the haystack.

The first time I tried to dive the Fairey Firefly we spent hours out on the boat and in the scorching sun searching for the wreckage. Our marks were not at all accurate but it took me a long time to acknowledge that we were nowhere near the plane wreck. I slowly drove up and down, and all around the area, hoping that eventually the remains of the sunken aircraft would pop up on the depth sounder, but all I got was sand. Suffice to say I was not a popular skipper that day, after dragging the troops out on a random mission to find and dive this little aircraft and failing so spectacularly.

A few years later I was back up in Jervis Bay, NSW and finding and diving the Firefly plane was again on the agenda - I really wanted to see this plane! This time I had slightly more accurate GPS marks and eventually found it despite the low relief. Oh boy, was I excited and proud of myself when there was a slight bump on the sounder! I was the first one in the water and I remember descending down a few meters and almost immediately seeing the entire plane in all its glory. The wreck of the airplane rests in about 13m of water and the vis in the Jervis Bay area was decent that day, so coming up on it was quite a memorable experience.

The site is only tiny, thirteen meters by twelve meters, but as a dive site it was spectacular. There was an incredible amount of fish life on the wreck; it was absolutely packed with marine life. I guess there isn't much else in terms of structure in the vicinity of the site, so all the animals congregate right here. It seemed to be like a little nursery; all around the wreck there were hundreds of baby port Jackson sharks, baby octopus, baby catfish and even baby flathead! A tiny dive site with tiny animals - it was very cute!



**Video**  
**Internet Connection Required**

<http://www.youtube.com/user/djwalker132>

The plane itself is actually in very good condition given that it crashed back in 1956. It sits upright and is largely intact, with the four-bladed propeller as a major feature. The Firefly is actually quite a unique site in Australian waters. The firefly as an aircraft has a fascinating history; it was designed to meet the British Admiralty's urgent need for a modern shipboard fighter. It went into production in 1941 and 1623 were built before production stopped in 1956. The Royal Australian Navy received a hundred and seven of them. The aircraft saw action in both WWII and in the Korean war and was quite a versatile little plane, but was predominantly used as a carrier based anti-submarine, reconnaissance and strike aircraft.

So how did it end up on the ocean floor? The Fairey Firefly VX381 collided with the Firefly WD887 on the 27th of November 1956 during a training mission. The two aircraft were flying circles in opposite directions when they had a mid-air collision. Fortunately the crew of the VX381 survived the crash despite one third of its wing missing. The crew of the Firefly WD887, Sub Lieutenant Arundel and Midshipman Fogarty, weren't so lucky and the plane and their bodies were never recovered. When diving sunken aircraft is it worth remembering that planes do not belong underwater and in this case a great tragedy was responsible for its sinking.

Further down the Australian coast, just off the shore of Williamstown in Victoria lie the remains of another little plane that is also worth mentioning. The Vultee Vengeance crashed into the sea on the 6th of March 1946 after experiencing an engine failure during gunnery practice. By all accounts the Vultee made a perfect belly landing until it ran into some rocks. Luckily no one was seriously hurt, although the pilot, Warrant Officer F.O. Knudson was admitted to hospital with slight head injuries.

The broken remains of the Vultee Vengeance rest in 10m (33ft) of water but in comparison to the Firefly it is difficult to make heads or tails off the site as it is heavily broken up. Further the visibility in the area is often less than average, with vis ranging between two feet and five meters. It is little wonder it took the guys from the MAAV (Maritime Archaeology Association of Victoria) over three years to identify the plane and tell its story.

It was hard work finding the plane wreckage as we only had visual marks for it, so had to line up landmarks on shore to pinpoint the location, rather than driving up straight to a GPS point. It's just as well that the area is quite flat underwater and even though the relief isn't much, the bump is pretty clear on the depth sounder. It was definitely easier going than the quest to find the Firefly and soon we were on top of it and in the water.

Beneath the water it is a pretty cool site although sponges and fan worms obscure the details of the aircraft. The European Fan-worm *Sabella spallanzanii* is quite evil, it is an introduced species and it cover every inch of the remains. I must admit that diving this site was interesting and a bit of a novelty, but it is not nearly as spectacular or impressive as the Fairey Firefly in Jervis Bay, so if you can only pick one Australian airplane wreck to dive, head to that one.

# Diving the Historic PS Clonmel

By Agnes Milowka

Imagine being woken by the sudden jolt of the ship as it strikes a sand bank traveling at ten knots per hour. The wooden ship shudders beneath you and then comes to a grinding halt. Imagine the fear, the confusion and the feeling of panic as you stumble out of bed and rush up on deck. Thick mist surrounds the ship but you can clearly see the waves that crush across the shallow sandbank, each one lifting the vessel higher upon the bank.

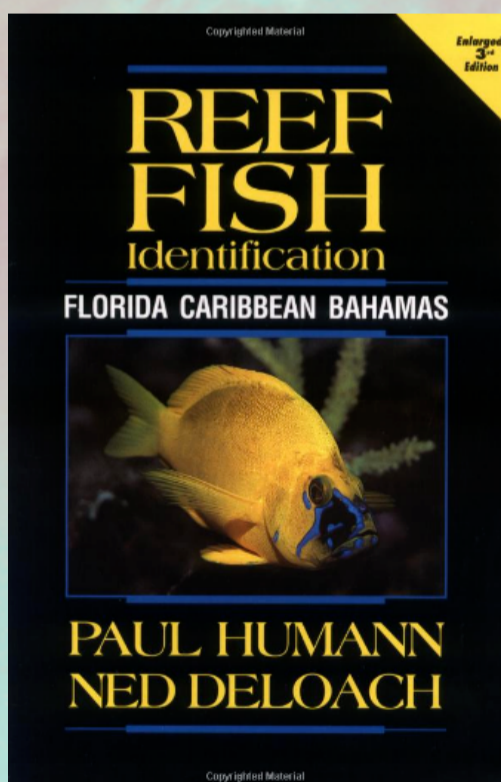
This describes the experience of those traveling on board the paddle steamer *PS Clonmel*, as it ran aground on its voyage from Sydney to Port Phillip (now Melbourne) in the early hours of the morning on the 2nd of Jan 1841. The ship and its thirty-eight passengers and forty-two crewmembers were firmly stuck and nothing, not even throwing cargo overboard was going to lighten the ship. There was nothing left to it, the ship had to be abandoned.

Captain Tollervey coordinated the effort and by the afternoon transferred all on board and some provisions ashore to a makeshift camp. While everyone was out of immediate danger, this was not the end of their problems; they were stranded and surrounded by wild, rugged and unexplored country, in one of the most remote areas of the young colony.

The *PS Clonmel* was a two masted, schooner rigged paddle steamer and was the first steamer to sail in Australian waters. The ship was one of the last wooden steamships built in England before iron became the dominant material used and as such it represents the peak of wooden shipbuilding technology. The ship was a total wreck and relatively little was salvaged off the vessel over the years, which makes this shipwreck a significant site and worthy of the highest level of protection. The wreck is also historically significant as it acted as a catalyst for the opening up of the Gippsland region to trade and pastoral settlement, as the wreck occurred just off the entrance of a deep harbor that became Port Albert. As such a 50m Protected Zone was declared around the wreck and access to it requires a permit from Heritage Victoria.

I was lucky enough to join the Maritime Heritage Unit of Heritage Victoria when they were doing field work on the site. Heritage Victoria staff regularly visit the site in order to monitor the wreck and study the remains of the hull and the machinery. A variety of artifacts including portholes, deck-lights and brass skylight protectors as well as cut glass tableware and a number of pennies have been recovered from the site and now reside in the local museum.

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There is a wealth of archaeological material left on site to this day however, much of it buried and protected by the sand. The most imposing part of the wreck is its boiler and the base of its funnel that protrudes out of the water at low tide. It's worth noting that the engine room of the *Clonmel* was 58ft long and took up more than a third of the ship's length! The 220 horsepower engine drove the paddle wheels, but it was a guzzler and required 610kg of coal per hour to run. Today this wreck is not only an incredible dive site (it is not often a diver gets an opportunity to dive on a shipwreck where relics can still be found on site) it also gives us a unique insight into the Australian way of life in the 1840s.

So what happened to the castaways, did they survive? No one knew they had wrecked and with little hope of salvation they had to take matters into their own hands. One of the passengers, a Mr Simpson was an experienced seaman and volunteered to take one of the whaleboats to the closest settlement in order to raise the alarm and get help. The seven volunteers piled into the frail open boat and set off towards Port Phillip the very next day. It took over sixty hours for the team to get in sight of civilization and they battled fierce wind and waves every step of the way. The little boat was swamped by the breaking seas many times throughout the voyage and required continual bailing to keep afloat. By the time the cutter *Sisters* picked them up, they were soaked to the skin, cold and exhausted. It was the heroic efforts of these men that saved the remainder of the shipwrecked crew.

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Photo by Wes Skiles





“Underwater caves are some of the most incredible and breath taking places on earth. Whether deep inside of them or simply in the cavern area, they know how to leave a punch.” [Agnes]



Piccaninnie Ponds, Mt Gambier,  
South Australia  
Photo by Agnes Milowha



Piccaninnie Ponds, Mt Gambier,  
South Australia  
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**By Agnes Milowka**

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