

+ SHIPWRECKS ARE SPECIAL PLACES, HIDDEN AS THEY ARE UNDER THE WAVES AND ONLY ACCESSIBLE TO THOSE WITH THE TRAINING, NECESSARY SKILLS AND EQUIPMENT TO VISIT THEM.

THE PACIFIC GAS WRECK

: DON SILCOCK www.indopacificimages.com

Divers love wrecks, as they nearly always offer something special. Sometimes it's because a wreck is a remarkably intact microcosm of a distant moment when disaster struck. For me, exploring such a wreck is like going back in time, as I visualize what the ship must have been like as a working vessel. Other times local conditions have turned the wreck into an artificial reef teeming with marine life. Sometimes if you're really lucky, you get both.

The *Pacific Gas* in Bootless Bay, 10 nautical miles southeast of Port Moresby, is just such a combination. My first dive on the wreck was on a trip to Loloata Resort in 2002, and is vividly etched into

my memory – it's one of the best wreck experiences I've personally had.

The wreck is protected from the southeast trade winds by nearby Horseshoe Reef, but is exposed to southwesterlies. I dived it in an uncomfortable one-metre swell. It's a fairly deep dive so briefings are thorough on both the wreck and any prevailing conditions because the currents can be quite strong. We were instructed to descend by the mooring line secured to the bow of the wreck in about 18 metres – a free descent could result in the current sweeping divers past the wreck.

While I bobbed up and down in the swell waiting for the signal to descend, I

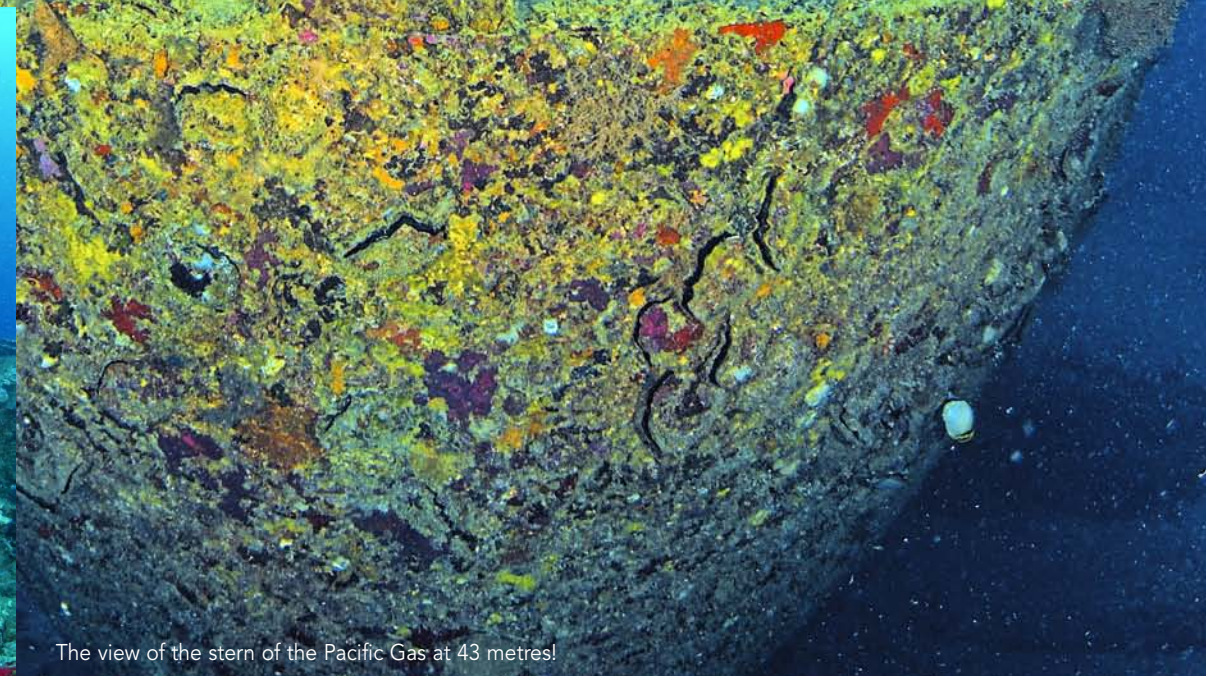
wondered what this dive would bring. "Not a lot" I thought initially as I pulled myself down the line in less than two-metre visibility. Was this going to be one of those "if only you'd been here last week" kinds of dives? But at about 10 metres the water suddenly cleared and below us was the 65 metre long *Pacific Gas* – all of it! Everything was visible from just above the bow including the large shoals of schooling jacks, snapper, and sweetlips circling the wreck. Amazing! There are other wrecks with more intense fish life, better soft corals, or more critters, but I have yet to dive one that's so intact and clearly recognizable as a ship. It has such a great diversity of marine life and is so photogenic!



Franco in the wheelhouse of the Pacific Gas



Hard & soft corals on the main winch at the bow



The view of the stern of the Pacific Gas at 43 metres!

Every time I went back to Loloata I was keen to dive the *Pacific Gas*, but due to the weather conditions I managed only a couple of dives on three subsequent trips. Finally in September 2007 with the support of Loloata Resort owner Dik Knight and his terrific dive team, I was able to conduct a series of dives on the *Pacific Gas* and document what I saw.

But first a little bit of history to put the whole story into context...

The Ship's Journey to Bootless Bay

The *Pacific Gas* was built by the Kanawa Dock Company in 1967 in Hiroshima, Japan, and named MS *Nanayo Maru*. As a liquefied gas carrier for its owners Okuda Gyogyo KK, it plied between

Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore under charter to Esso. The gas was stored in two large cylindrical refrigerated containers in the mid section. *Nanayo Maru* was sold to the Australian company Liquefied Gas Carriers in 1972, renamed the *Pacific Gas*, and ran between Australia and Papua New Guinea for Boral Gas until 1980 when it was taken out of service. As part of its de-commissioning the gas storage vessels were removed and installed on land at the Boral Gas facilities in Port Moresby and Lae.

The ship's hull was later sold to a group of Port Moresby businessmen led by prominent politician Sir Hugo Berghauser; they planned to run it

aground on Ela Beach and convert it into a seafood restaurant and nightclub. Unfortunately permission to ground the *Pacific Gas* was refused by Port Moresby's Town Planner, and the ship was moored in the harbour until June 1986. After several missed deadlines to remove the vessel because of its poor condition, the Harbours Board issued a final ultimatum to remove the ship within 14 days.

The Halsteads and the *Pacific Gas*

Bob Halstead and his wife Dinah started a diving business in Port Moresby in 1976, and they later played a pivotal role in the final resting place of the *Pacific Gas*. Their original diving venture Oceanic Enterprises, was renamed Tropical Diving Adventures late the following year when Bob and Dinah bought out their business partner Len Capon. Tropical Diving Adventures catered for both local and tourist divers, concentrating on the reefs of Bootless Bay for its open water dives. In 1978 Bob enlisted the help of the Port Moresby Sub-Aqua Club to create the first wreck dives in the area. Two condemned ex-government vessels MV *Parama* and MV *Jade*, were to be towed out to sea and scuttled, but Bob, Dinah, and the Sub-Aqua Club were able to get them sunk in Bootless Bay adjacent to Horseshoe Reef.

I contacted Bob when I started to research this article and he told me an interesting story about how he'd tried to get Horseshoe Reef declared as the first marine park in PNG. Bob received strong support from the PNG government all the way up to cabinet level, but a lack of funding eventually derailed the idea. So, in true Halstead fashion, Bob made a "Unilateral Declaration of Marine Park" by just telling everybody it was a marine park. This apparently worked just as well as a formal declaration! He also emphasized just how supportive the PNG Department of Environment & Conservation had been about sinking the wrecks, by assuming ownership of the vessels in case of any future liability problems.

When Bob heard of the Harbours Board's final ultimatum he approached Sir Hugo and eventually convinced him that the best solution to the problem was



for the *Pacific Gas* to join the growing list of wrecks in Bootless Bay!

The Sinking as described by Bob

"Pacific Salvage cleaned up the vessel and towed it out to a spot I'd marked in the shelter of Horseshoe Reef with the stern in 40m of water. We moored the ship and Ian Short, a local commercial diver and explosives expert, planted the explosive charges which worked perfectly and sank the *Pacific Gas* in just 12 minutes. The bow hit the bottom first giving it a ding, and then the rest of the vessel sank perfectly upright with the stern in 43m of water. There are photos of the vessel sinking. At that time we started operating *Telita* in Milne Bay and moved our operation from Bootless, so we missed out on many of the benefits of the sinking - but it's a wonderful dive and I'm proud of it."

Diving the *Pacific Gas*

Lying on a slope and with the stern in 43 metres, the logical way to dive the wreck is to descend the mooring line to the bow in 18 metres. There's a lot to see around the bow, but it's best to save this for the end of the dive as there are some significantly good things to see down deeper!

The mid-section of the wreck is where the large LPG storage tanks used to be, and they've left some very large holes! I'm sure if you had the time to explore these would be quite a lot to see critter wise, but I've never had the time and/or air to do this. Instead I make a bee-line for the bridge area and the stern, where most of the real action is. There used to be a line running from the bow to the bridge which allowed you to find it even in the worst vis, but when I returned in 2007 the line was no longer there. The line allowed you to stay relatively

the bottom of bootless^o

time and air supply need careful monitoring, as the best is still to come.

Descending further towards the stern delivers a superb view back up the whole length of the ship, and if you swim past the stern in open water at about 40 metres you can take in the tremendous vista of the wreck. This was 'the image' I really wanted as it encapsulates the ethos of the *Pacific Gas* and its location on the slope near Horseshoe Reef.

Franco (AKA Francis Tolewa) my incredibly patient Loloata dive guide was a perfect model, even somehow making his dreadlocks stand up so they were silhouetted against the sunlight! Capturing this image required us both to do two deep dives, and as I had to be below the stern to shoot upwards, I ended up at 43 metres. My nitrogen-muddled brain had to calculate the right balance of ambient and strobe light for correct exposure - and I was acutely aware of both my rapidly declining remaining bottom time and air supply as I fought the current to stay in position. I'm not sure how Franco managed to hover so perfectly in position for so

Facing page:

Some of the deck equipment is no longer recognizable underneath its thick coat of marine growth and hovering fish!

The wheelhouse of the *Pacific Gas* and some of its regular inhabitants

This page:

The actual sinking of the *Pacific Gas*, photo courtesy of Bob Halstead

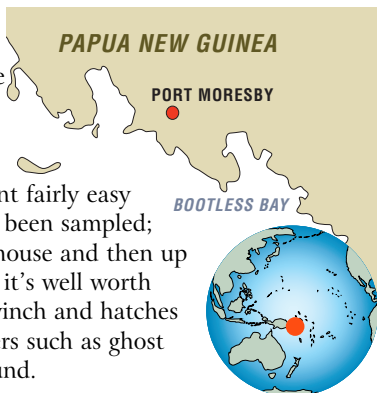
The rich growth hosts plenty of small critters





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long, but I bet he was wondering what on earth I was doing! But he did a great job and as always was the essence of the great dive guide and instructor he is.



The angle of the wreck makes the ascent fairly easy once the depths around the stern have been sampled; you simply head back up to the wheelhouse and then up to the bow. If you have enough air left it's well worth exploring around the coral encrusted winch and hatches at the bow, as there's a variety of critters such as ghost pipefish and leaf scorpionfish to be found.

Its still about 22 metres in the bow area, so whilst your bottom time may have expanded, your remaining air has not, and I'm always keen to ensure I have enough to complete the extended safety stop on the mooring line I inevitably incur. Once I'm at five metres and all I have to do is wait out my stop, I can relax and look back down on the wreck. The schooling jacks, snapper, and sweetlips reclaim it again after the temporary visitors have departed.

Special Thanks and appreciation to Dik Knight, Franco, and Yoshi from Loloata for organizing the dives on the *Pacific Gas*. Special thanks also to Bob Halstead for his first hand and in-depth knowledge on the details of the sinking of the *Pacific Gas*. Finally Neil Whiting, who I've never met but greatly admire for his excellent book *Wrecks & Reefs of Port Moresby* (ISBN 1-86273-084-9) from which I was able to gather a great deal of background information for this article.

>LINK: www.pngholidays.com.au



Franco (Francis Tolewa) and Yoshi (possibly the only person to dive PNG in a drysuit!)

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