



Waterman Ridge



Oscar wreck



Observation Point, Wonderpus



Leigh eventually finds the tunnel at Bob's Knob

# LINDENHAFEN AFFAIR

> I HEARD ONCE THAT NOTORIETY IS GAINED NOT BY THE ADVENTURES ONE HAS, BUT RATHER BY THE PEOPLE ONE HAS THOSE ADVENTURES

WITH. THIS SAYING HAS ALWAYS HAD A RING OF TRUTH FOR ME, BUT NO TRUER THAN ON MY MOST RECENT DIVING ESCAPADES.

: BOB HALSTEAD

The adventure begins with a notorious Captain. In this case Alan Raabe, who has lived a swashbuckling life in the tradition of Ahab, Bligh, Nelson, Blackbeard and Cousteau, (albeit simultaneously). I was invited aboard the recently refurbished MV *FeBrina* under Alan's able command. He is a passionate man, devoted to championing PNG, and prone to telling unbelievable stories of his adventures that turn out to be true.

Our merry bunch included a group of friends led by ex-Mayor of Melbourne, Irvin Rockman, the self proclaimed "World's Most Famous One-eyed Jewish Underwater Photographer". Irvin taught himself to dive before diving was even

invented, eats live sharks for breakfast and can turn green water blue, just by uttering a few of his choice epithets. OK, I fibbed about the sharks, but he's a diving hero.

We were to be cruising around my favourite sites in Milne Bay Province, taking it easy, and catering for Irvin who had just lost one eye and was recovering from a bout of radiotherapy. He was not looking his best, and glowed at night. But everyone loved him because the sea temperature gained a degree or two every time he entered the water. It's not global warming; it's Irvin!

Alan was raving about a special place he had dived on the south coast of New Britain called Lindenhafen. We were not

so certain; diving was great in Milne Bay. But Alan was persistent and, after brandishing a cutlass and threatening to shut off our nitrox supply, he convinced us that Lindenhafen had the Siren's allure. So we agreed to dive Milne Bay first, shuffle some passengers at Alotau after ten days, then spend the next ten days cruising to Rabaul, allocating three days at Lindenhafen on the way.

With so many great dive sites to choose from in PNG it is often easy just to do the rounds of favourite sites, and neglect 'new' areas. Indeed I have had a guest berate me in the past because I spent one dive (out of 50 total) exploring a virgin reef. I thought it would be a special treat, but he had arrived with a list of the famous dive sites he expected to visit. He



Doubilet Reef



Camel Reef, Rhinopias aphanes



Jake wreck



Diga shows us bombs at Jake wreck



Blue ribbon eel



Baitfish at Bob's Bommie



Jake wreck



Leigh with Hawkesbill turtle



Baldwin's Bridge

failed to understand that all the sites on his list were ones that were also virgin before my guests and I explored them.

I therefore used the nightly rum-laced negotiations to push for a dive later in the trip at a gigantic underwater archway named Baldwin's Bridge. At the southern tip of New Ireland, this would now be close to our route. This unique site had been discovered from our boat *Telita* in the 1980s, but I had never returned. Others sent to find it had either failed, or were unable to have good dives because of its exposed nature and inclement weather. It is an awe-inspiring dive, and I had nagging impressions of its grandeur that needed resolution. My fellow adventurers had never dived there.

Milne Bay diving is extraordinarily variable. It is famous for its muck dives where divers search for exotic marine critters in, well, less than exotic surroundings. Indeed Milne Bay is where the genre of muck diving was created, but it also has fabulous reef diving and some wonderful WW2 wrecks.

For the wreck-lovers, a must-do dive was the P38 Lightning fighter aircraft wreck at Basilaki Island. It is a well-preserved and exceptional aircraft. I was dismayed on reaching the site to find that the visibility looked to be the worst that I had ever seen. From the surface I could barely make out the reef top that I use to guide

me to the wreck at 27m. I went in first with a buoy and line to mark the wreck so that the divers could descend directly, and not waste valuable bottom time trying to find it. I hate it when conditions prevent me from showing sites at their best, so I jumped in with a heavy heart – only to be totally shocked to discover the foul water was only a surface layer, and a few metres down transformed into the clearest I had ever seen there.

The exultant reefs Waterman's Ridge and Doublet's Reef justly live up to their namesakes - legendary divers Stan Waterman and David Doublet. These reefs both had great conditions with clear water and currents that were weak enough to dive, but strong enough to turn on the fishes and soft corals. Fabulous sea fans, red sea whips, black corals, and riots of fishes greeted us. Greenpeace's predictions failed again; the reefs could not be healthier. Irvin was looking healthier too, responding to the benefits of hyperbaric nitrox that we breathe instead of air these days.

Next up was Bob's Knob - iconic too, as it is a massive obelisk, modestly named after myself, rising from 50m beside a beautiful reef. A tunnel through its top, draped with black coral trees, has two entrances on one side that join to only a single exit on the other. I insisted that I get in the water first with my model Leigh Paine to make sure the dive was safe for

the others. Not one of them believed that of course, so it was a race to get to the tunnel first. To Leigh I confided we would take the short cut across deep, shark-infested, ocean - even if she was not too enthusiastic.

I had instructed her to swim round the other side and then back through the tunnel towards me so I could get great shots of her coming through before it got churned. I got there and waited, and waited... and waited... I was eventually joined by another photographer and then another. Now we were jostling and Leigh had still not appeared. Payback! But then I noticed her bubbles wafting up past the entrance on the other side. She had gone too deep and missed the entrance. Pressure from behind, as other divers arrived, pushed me through. I had a ball anyway shooting baitfish, turtles and a magnificent giant clam on the nearby reef.

Observation Point, a renowned muck dive, lived up to its reputation. The best critters were wonderpus (a rare orange-striped octopus), various ghost pipefish, a flamboyant cuttlefish and plenty of gold-bar sand divers, *Trichonotus halstead*, first discovered at this site and named after my wife and myself. Nearby at Balaban's Bommie the water was incredibly clear and the sponge-garlanded overhangs and canyons were great for photography. The corals at Calypso Reef were in excellent

Beneath *FeBrina* at Milne Bay

shape, including a superb stand of cabbage coral. At Camel Reef *FeBrina*'s ace dive guide Diga rubbed a bottle and called in a mob of grey reef sharks – and I managed to find a splendid lacy scorpionfish – *Rhinopias aphanes*.

At last it was time to start cruising north. We departed Milne Bay waters with a pleasant dive on the wreck of the WW2 Liberty Ship Russel H. Chittenden. The bow of this ship is still stuck on the top of a shallow reef, much of the engine room is still intact, and the other wreckage is strewn over the reef to a depth of over 40m. We crossed the Solomon Sea that night and early the next day arrived at the heart of Alan's desire - Lindenhafen.

An abandoned wreck on the reef top greeted us as we cruised into Mia Pass. Several islands and reefs protect the harbour. There is a closed fishing resort and a few villages, but not much else going on. Underwater however, it is a love story. Alan moored in Mia Pass and caught the incoming tide. It looked fantastic and it was. The Lindenhafen affair had begun.

After an enthusiastic dive briefing by Alan and instructor Josie, the fabulously clear water lured us with reef ridges running between white sand patches to the drop off. A school of barracuda beckoned. Coquettish bannerfish, batfish, and sweetlips flirted by. A shy but macho

*Trichonotus halstead*

giant Queensland grouper led a harem of trevally, just out of good photo range. The reefs were orgies of sea whips and orange sponges, the corals perfect. This is one of the best reef passes I have dived. Grey reef sharks cruised lazily near the drop off, and eagle rays made hypnotic circuits. A second pass the other side of Mia Island was also seductive, though Mia was the muse. Irvin was happy and looked ten years younger, we were all smitten: this affair was no one-night-stand!

There are several aircraft wrecks in the harbour - a Jake floatplane, bits of an Oscar, a Pete biplane and another blown apart that we did not dive. The Jake was terrific and an easy dive in just 18m of still water. The wreck is upside down and one of the floats has dislodged, but the bomb bays can be opened and Diga obliged to reveal two bombs surrounded by red sponge.

The resort jetty and nearby Gurim Island are excellent muck dives, with octopus, ghost pipefish, soles, weird nudibranchs and blue ribbon eels. Nearby, the Oscar engine with partly buried two-blade propeller, and one wing, was inhabited by sweetlips. I found the other wing 100m away on a reef rich with sea fans and whips. I could've spent much more time at Lindenhafen, but the affair will resume, as it is now an established destination for *FeBrina* in the northwest season from December to March.

Now I was getting nervous. It had been 22 years since I last dived Baldwin's Bridge and before GPS navigation. I only had my memory to guide me and, as everyone is telling me, that is becoming feeble as senility encroaches. As we cruised round Cape St. George I was alarmed that I did not immediately recognise anything. I was looking for a rock with a surrounding reef. As it turns out the rock was hidden before a larger island and as we moved closer it came into view.

I thought the Bridge was on the eastern side. The reef fringing the rock sloped to about 18m then became a wall. Along this wall an amazing arch stretches across to another reef over bottom 60m deep. I remembered I could swim under the arch at 27m.

We stopped the boat and I went in with Diga. There was a considerable current against us and the visibility was down. We worked round the wall and I could feel the Bridge appear before I saw it. Then there it was, reaching out into the gloom. I'd found it, senility be damned!

Diga ascended so *FeBrina* could be anchored right at the spot while I reacquainted myself. Trevally and bannerfish buzzed me, soft corals abounded. Black coral whips and large sea fans thrust from the wall. It was a formidable dive, aided by the current and



Milne Bay reef



Schooling jacks



Wreck at Mia Pass



P38 Lightning wreck



Mia Pass



poor visibility. But I was thrilled to return to this wonder of nature.

A few hours later we steamed to Kokopo and muck diving was fruitful at Johnny Lau's Jetty close to the new airport. Later we visited Rabaul Harbour. The volcano was smoking. The eruptions I witnessed the previous year had ceased - for a while - but the place is a mess. Ash covers the landscape

and the old airport buried. Headless palm trees spike the scenery.

To consummate the adventure we sea salts had a somewhat riotous evening out at the Hamamas Hotel, a pristine oasis that is entered by means of a 2m ramp down off the ash-raised road. The Rabaul Yacht Club is now a large shed, but drinks are free at happy hour and stories of the old days just as

outrageous. Alan and the crew of *FeBrina* had done us proud, Irvin was fit, and Rabaul was a magic place to end a stirring adventure. The Lindenhafen affair was definitely one to remember.

Sadly Irvin Rockman passed away after this cruise due to his illness. It was to be his last diving adventure.

