

THE AIRCRAFT WRECKS OF MILNE BAY PROVINCE

GURNEY AIRSTRIP IN MILNE BAY WAS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT AIRSTRIPS IN THE PACIFIC WAR, AND IS STILL VITAL TODAY PROVIDING AIR SERVICES FOR ALOTAU, THE MILNE BAY PROVINCE CAPITAL. AFTER THE STALEMATE OF THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA, JAPANESE FORCES INVADDED MILNE BAY WITH THE AIM OF FORMING A BASE FROM WHICH THEY COULD ATTACK PORT MORESBY AND AUSTRALIA.

:: BOB HALSTEAD

Unfortunately their intelligence was poor and instead of landing in a key position to attack Gurney, they attacked Turnbull Airstrip, then only under construction. The Australian pilots flying from Gurney were able to strafe the Japanese to smithereens, and win the battle.

Milne Bay was quickly reinforced and Gurney became a major base for forces repelling the enemy. Inevitably, many aircraft were lost, some directly due to enemy action and these often plunged catastrophically into land or sea. But many others were victims of mechanical problems or, more often, faulty navigation in difficult terrain and weather. These aircraft mostly ditched in the sea close to land, and, depending on the skill of the pilot, sunk in near-perfect, intact, condition. The pilots and crews generally survived and the aircraft settled to the bottom, wonderful time capsules and memorials to those brave men that flew them.

During our 30 years of diving adventures exploring Milne Bay Province waters Dinah and I've been fortunate to be the first to scuba dive a couple of these wrecks. We still regularly dive them plus a few more that others have found. Because the diving industry has grown, villagers see financial benefits from divers coming to their area and we've received several requests to come and look for aircraft which villagers remember ended up in the sea near their homes.

Sadly though, clear memories of the war have faded so searching for a wreck can be frustrating. We've spent days searching fruitlessly, but last year we struck lucky on a *Telita* cruise from Alotau to Tufi. Talking to friends at Bogaboga village after diving the magnificent B17 bomber wreck *Blackjack*, I was told to go see Henry from Magabara, not far down the coast, because he'd actually seen an aircraft wreck when out on a reef fishing for beche de mer. We cruised to Magabara; as we entered the anchorage two canoes approached from shore. I called out "I'm looking for Henry!". "That's Me!" came an enthusiastic reply. Henry turns out to be a wonderful, cheerful, outspoken character. Yes he has seen a wreck, yes it is an aircraft - one with two tails and the pilot in the middle (I immediately suspect a P38) and when I ask "How deep?" he says without hesitation "17 meters".

That surprised me. "How do you know its 17 meters?" Henry tells me he got a rock and some rope and lowered the rock to the bottom then pulled it up and measured the rope. "Can you take us there?" "Of course" he says. Henry's father Katura and some friends join us on *Telita* and we head for a nearby reef. I ask what happened to the pilot but no one is sure. Henry shows our captain where to anchor, then Henry and his group don goggles



Above: The P38 H Lightning wreck - a few soft corals grow under the port wing

Right top: Inside the cockpit of the famous B17 bomber *Blackjack* Right: The P38 F Lightning wreck, the undercarriage wheel in the fuselage

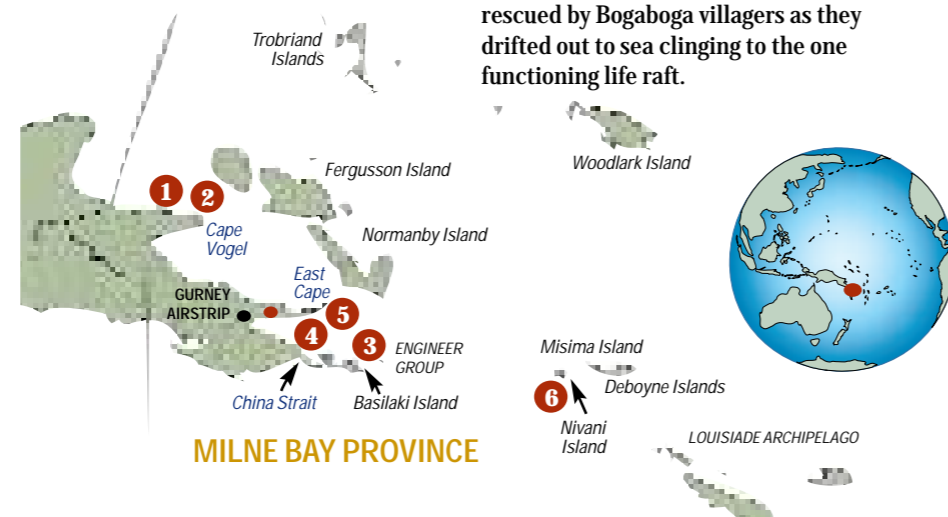


and jump into the water. About 30 seconds later Katura puts his hand up, the others swim to him and now all their hands go up. The wreck is only 20 meters from *Telita*! She's anchored on top of a ridge and down the slope we can see a wing tip. The rest of the aircraft soon comes into view – an amazing sight, resting on the reef slope completely intact. Its propellers were feathered to reduce resistance when ditched and the whole wreck is covered in coral and colourful sponges. This is the best aircraft wreck I've ever seen in terms of its pristine condition and profusion of marine growth. What's more it's definitely a Lockheed P 38 Lightning fighter, one of the most spectacular aircraft of the War. I swim straight for the cockpit. The pilot obviously escaped and I search for the radio call sign which will identify the aircraft. I know where to look and soon have the tiny brass tag, number 2-12649. Now we can find the history!



All our *Telita* guests are very happy to be first to dive the wreck and very concerned that it remain a perfect memorial. Before broadcasting our find to the Papua New Guinea Divers Association we set up a mooring on the reef and prepared a visitors book for Henry, who will act as guardian of the site.

Justin Taylan, who has a terrific web site called pacificwrecks.com, assisted our research – we soon discovered that our P-38F serial number 42-12649 was flown by Captain Porter on a delivery voyage from Amberley in Australia to Port Moresby and apparently on to Gurney on 4 November 1942. He suffered engine failure and had to ditch the aircraft and was subsequently rescued. Our aircraft had not even fought one mission!



The Lockheed A-29 Hudson wreck



The P38 H Lightning wreck; diver Leigh Paine examines the port propeller



The P38 H Lightning wreck is at 27 metres near Basilaki Island

1 P 38F Lockheed Lightning Fighter
 Location: off Magabara Village, east of Cape Vogel
 Deepest depth: 17 m
 Typical Visibility: 15 m
 Current: Nil
 Accessibility: Year round, exposed to NW winds
 Marine Growth: Very heavy growths of coral and sponges

2 B17 Bomber *Blackjack*
 Location off Bogaboga Village, Cape Vogel
 Deepest depth: 46 m
 Typical Visibility: 40 m
 Current: Up to 1 knot
 Accessibility: Year round, exposed to strong SE trades
 Marine Growth: Poor. Some sponge growth and corals
Blackjack, discovered by Rod Pearce in 1986, is PNG's most famous aircraft wreck. After an heroic mission to bomb Rabaul the pilot, Ralph Deloach, who had lost both engines on one side of the four engined aircraft, managed to keep the B17 flying through the night in what he hoped was into allied territory before ditching just after dawn off Cape Vogel. The crew had only 45 seconds to exit before the B17 sank and then they were rescued by Bogaboga villagers as they drifted out to sea clinging to the one functioning life raft.

Its huge size, the clear water and completely intact condition make this a Mecca for wreck worshippers. However its depth at 46 m, the currents, and necessity to make decompression stops, make this a dive for the experienced and competent only. Although all 10 crew survived the crash, two sport divers have since lost their lives diving the wreck. A permanent line from the shallow reef top in front of Bogaboga village guides divers directly to the wreck and the same line should be used for ascents. Allow at least half your total air supply for a complete and safe ascent. This usually means a once-only gentle swim around the wreck inspecting the engines and wings, cockpit (by looking in the open windows), top turret gun and finally the magnificent massive tail with twin machine guns right at the end of the fuselage. Do not enter the aircraft, there are dangling cables ready to snare the unwary. The starboard tail plane is bent upwards and can be used as a guide back to the ascent line.

3 P38H Lockheed Lightning Fighter
 Location: NE corner of Basilaki Bay, Basilaki Island
 Deepest depth: 27 m
 Typical Visibility: 12 m
 Current: Nil
 Accessibility: Excellent all year
 Marine Growth: Slight. Large anemones and some fishes.
 A guide is useful in locating this wreck which lies on a sand/silt bottom in 27 m facing a sloping coral reef. If the guide can locate the wreck and mark it with a buoy, the easiest way to make the dive is to descend directly to the wreck down the buoy line, hovering above the wreck to avoid stirring up the sediment, and ascending up the reef slope, which has many interesting features and critters.

When we first found this wreck in December 1981 the propellers were missing, but these we later discovered on the bottom below where the aircraft must first have hit the water, recovered using a lift bag, and placed back near their original positions. The radio call sign is (4)2-66869. The pilot of this aircraft, Alex Illnicki, had navigation problems returning from a patrol to Salamaua. He passed his intended airstrip at Dobodura and ended up near Misima before turning back, attempted to reach the nearest strip at Gurney, but ran out of fuel. He survived the ditching on 27 November 1943, and used his dinghy to reach shore. The aircraft has bullet holes in the port tail fin. All its guns are in place.

4 P 40E Kittyhawk
 Location: Between two small islands on northern side of China Strait
 Deepest depth: 12 m
 Typical Visibility: 15 m
 Current: Very strong at times, refer to

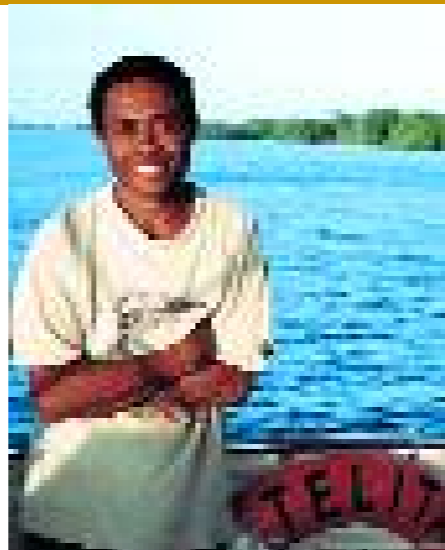
tide charts for times of slack currents.
 Accessibility: Sheltered year round, but see current.
 Marine Growth: Light growth, heavy corrosion
 Pilot Alan Whetters, actually attempted to salvage it and get it towed back to Gurney after he ditched it on 26 August 1942. However the task proved too difficult, the Japanese were reported nearby, and the aircraft sank again in about 12 m of water. The P40, serial number A29-110, is badly corroded and missing its tail. This is a very tricky dive because of the strong tidal currents that run over the site. It should be dived at slack current during neap tides. Local villagers can help in locating the wreck which can be seen from the surface on clear days.

5 A 29 Lockheed Hudson
 Location: West of East Cape, in Milne Bay
 Deepest depth: 15 m
 Typical Visibility: 10 m
 Current: Nil

The legendary B17 bomber *Blackjack* lies at 46 metres to the sand. This is one for the very experienced only and warrants respect; two sport divers have died here.



Top: The Lockheed A-29 Hudson wreck showing the port side machine gun
 Above: The Lockheed A-29 Hudson wreck - inside the fuselage. Note the machine gun.



The P38 F Lightning is a beautiful wreck, heavily encrusted with corals and sponges
Above: Henry, now the P38 F Lightning wreck site guardian; we prepared a visitors' book for his use to record future divers on this site.

Accessibility: Only November - March on calm days

Marine Growth: Very little

Bad weather caused this reconnaissance aircraft to run out of fuel and be ditched on 24 February 1943 only a few minutes away from a safe landing at Gurney Airstrip. The A-29, serial number A16-245, now lies upside down on a silty bottom close to a rocky coral reef only 100 m from shore. It is believed the four crew, including the pilot Raymond Kelly, survived the crash. Machine guns and ammunition can be seen in the side ports of the aircraft and there are a few other interesting artefacts, including a long trailing aerial.

The site is totally exposed to the SE trade winds and may only be dived for a few months of the year. Even then visibility can be poor, and being upside down, this is one for the really keen wreck fanatic only.

6 Zero Fighter

Location: Nivani Island, Louisiade

Archipelago

Deepest depth: 3 m

Typical Visibility: 12 m

Current: Nil

Accessibility: Year round

Marine Growth: None, but many small fishes.

In the battle of the Coral Sea the Japanese aircraft carrier (flat top) *Shoho*

was sunk in very deep water. This Zero apparently belonged to the carrier and was forced to ditch. It landed over sheltered seagrass beds near Nivani Island in the Deboyne Island group. The locals all know where it is. Because of its easy access the wreck has been picked over by passing yachties over the years and not much remains in the way of instruments nor guns. However the rest of the Zero is intact and the propeller is photogenic. This is really a snorkel rather than a scuba dive, and a pleasant way to spend an evening before cocktails!

Please note that all war relics are now protected from souveniring by Papua New Guinea law.

OTHER AIRCRAFT WRECKS

Rod Pearce has recently found a B 26 Marauder serial number 40 -1402 off Fergusson Island, but at a depth of 60 metres its going to be out of range for most sport diving. There's an Avenger yet to be found off Rossel Island, several wrecks awash in very shallow water, and many other reported aircraft wreck sites that need to be investigated. We have a couple of hot ones we are chasing right now

GETTING TO MILNE BAY, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

It is very easy to get to PNG and there are Air Niugini connecting flights to Alotau on most days of the week. No overnights in Port Moresby! A 60 day tourist visa is available on arrival. Customs and immigration are friendly and courteous and understand about divers carrying a lot of gear. Air Niugini also has a generous excess baggage allowance that you can claim for diving gear. It is a good idea to mention this when buying your ticket. Air Niugini flies to Port Moresby from Sydney, Brisbane and Cairns (daily from Cairns), Singapore and Manila.

Dive Operators that operate from Alotau –

Live Aboards:

Telita Dive Adventures info@telitadive.com www.telitadive.com

MV Golden Dawn dive@mvgoldendawn.com

www.mvgoldendawn.com

MV Chertan mvchertan@bigpond.net www.chertan.com

Mike Ball's Paradise Sport resv@mikeball.com

www.mikeball.com

Marlin 1 info@marlin1charters.com.au

www.marlin1charters.com.au

Land Based:

Alotau Dive and Tours alotau@png-japan.co.jp

www.pananufa-web.com

Tawali Resort reservations@tawali.com www.tawali.com

For more info and aircraft wreck updates

www.halsteaddiving.com