

+ GRASS HAD GROWN OVER THE WARTIME STEEL 'MARSDEN' MATTING OF GURNEY AIRSTRIP AND A BUMPY LANDING WELCOMED ME TO MILNE BAY. IT WAS JANUARY 1973 AND I 'D ARRIVED AS AN EDUCATION OFFICER TO TEACH AT THE ALOTAU HIGH SCHOOL. ON THE RIBBED AND POTHOLED DIRT HIGHWAY FROM THE AIRSTRIP TO ALOTAU I SOON DISCOVERED ON WHICH SIDE OF THE ROAD CARS DROVE – BOTH OF THEM – AND THE MIDDLE.

EARLYDAYS

: BOB HALSTEAD

I'd learned to dive in the Bahamas five years previously and was already a qualified Instructor. Where the road followed the shore, the water sparkled temptingly. Captain John Moresby, who had sailed the first European ship here exactly 100 years before, had named Milne Bay after Lord Milne of the British Admiralty. He had explored the many islands in what is now Milne Bay Province and discovered China Strait – the sought after 'short cut' to China. I had dreams of emulating his adventures by exploring underwater.

Reporting to the Education Office in Alotau, I learned there was no



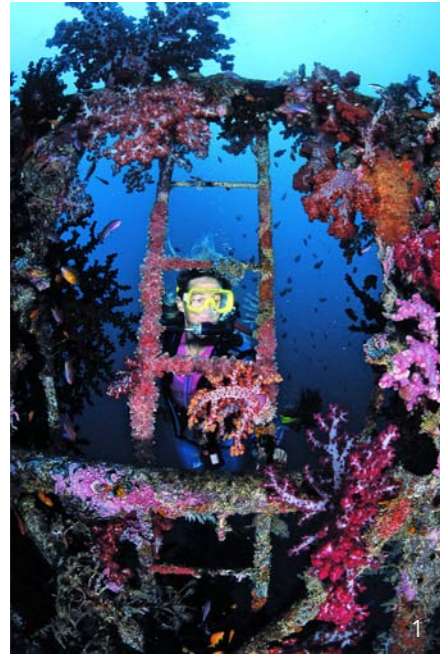
After settling in to school life I bought a small speedboat and started to teach new colleagues and friends to dive. Among these was my future wife Dinah, who was one of the most natural and talented divers I ever taught. She soon started showing me marine animals I'd never even heard of! We were married, and in 1977 we started PNG's first full time sport diving business in Port Moresby with a dive shop and school, and ran day trips to the barrier reef out of Bootless Bay. We created an unofficial marine park at Horseshoe Reef and, with Government approval, sank several derelict vessels as dive sites. One of Dinah's greatest finds on Horseshoe was the second-ever specimen of a fantastic scorpionfish, *Rhinopias aphanes*. Loloata Island Resort in Bootless Bay is now THE destination for divers wishing to see this fish.

Solatai, built in Bougainville in 1979 was our first proper day dive boat, and twice a year I'd close down our dive school and take guests, mostly our own certified students but with a growing number of tourist divers, on adventurous 'Scuba Safaris' to explore more of Milne Bay. We camped ashore, and, at our favourite villages, we had villagers build a bush materials shelter for us. These were more comfortable (and rainproof) than tents - but not by much. *Solatai* is still going strong, operated by The Dive Centre, Port Moresby.

In the late 1970s, skilled salvage diver and engineer Kevin Baldwin bought a handsome trading vessel he renamed *Seang* that could accommodate 12 passengers and carried three inflatable boats to dive from. He ran one long scientific charter but soon realized he needed to go trading to raise the money to keep the boat going, and it never got into tourist diving. Around the same time Rod Pearce, PNG's champion wreck finder, built his dive boat *Barbarian*. Rod started to run wreck dive expeditions around PNG but his boat, like *Solatai*, was too small for guests to live onboard comfortably. He now runs a larger boat *Barbarian 2*. Excellent land-based dive



- 1 Kevin Baldwin with *Seang* 1978
- 2 The long walk over the reef flats at Wuvulu
- 3 A B25 aircraft wreck
- 4 Diving China Strait from *Solatai* 1979
- 5 Dive boat *Solatai* on safari in Milne Bay 1981
- 6 Kevin Baldwin with sweetlips, Magic Passage, Madang 1979
- 7 Dinah returning from a dive at Horseshoe Marine Park, Bootless Bay, Port Moresby 1981



- 1 The *Pai 2*, deliberately sunk in 1982
- 2 Dinah Halstead diving Port Moresby 1977
- 3 Building *Telita* in Milne Bay 1985
- 4 Fishes at Alcester Island 1979
- 5 Diving from *Telita* 1989

resorts were opened at Madang, Loloata Island, Tufi and Walindi. The early days were tough with heavy reliance on domestic non-diving tourism.

But by 1980 the world wanted to dive Papua New Guinea and See and Sea Travel's Carl Roessler from San Francisco was leading the pack, as he usually did. Carl contacted me to investigate the possibility of getting a PNG boat to use for tourist diving.

First however we made a trip to Wuvulu Island together where an enterprising American lawyer had built a small beach dive resort for his son who had married a Wuvulu lady. It had some pleasant but not exceptional diving, but no anchorage nor wharf, was weather dependent and required flights on weight-limited small aircraft.

Jean Michel Cousteau had used Wuvulu for his Project Ocean Search expeditions and for that it was ideal because the project's hardy young people were able to walk the extensive reef flats to discover marine critters and make the occasional dive. The dive resort was never a success, but in 1988 the Cousteau team went back to Wuvulu and it produced some of the most spectacular footage of all the Cousteau expeditions to PNG. Orcas killed a shark and brought it to the cameramen on the surface to film in an extraordinary scene many still remember.

Melanesian Explorer was a 130ft. passenger vessel owned by Melanesian Tourist Services based in Madang and mostly used to take tourists for village visits along the Sepik River. The operator decided it could be used for dive charters and I could put portable compressors on board and some dive gear and it would be a liveboard of sorts. I ran one dive trip on her with a group of crazy Italian divers but they mostly just wanted to sunbathe on deck, play cards and shout at each other. Their group leader and I did most of the diving. I hated this boat since it had very low headroom. It was built initially as a Japanese ferry. I stood 190 cm tall, so continually banged my head on low bits of the ship. Now I'm about 180 cm and bald.

See and Sea Travel was bringing some of Carl's regular dive travelers and we would have to provide some real diving. Carl told me he had an agreement with the owner that he would have the boat just for his divers but when we turned up we

discovered that we were sharing the boat with a group of general tourists who wanted to go ashore, and not dive. I had to restrain Carl, or violence would have ensued.

Since the *Explorer* couldn't be anchored on dive sites we had to rely on one of the two ship's boats to take us diving. All went reasonably well until one of these boats broke down and we were competing with the land tourists.

One day we were diving at the Trobriand Islands. The north coast had a shallow fringing reef that sloped away into deep water. We decided the boat would drop us off at a likely looking spot and we'd then slowly drift/swim along the reef. The plan was that the boat would stay with us and pick us up as we finished our dives. However as we were getting in the water the boat driver told us he had been instructed to return to the ship to drop some people ashore and he'd then immediately come back for us.

Two hours later we were out of air, still without a boat and had been drifting along the reef for an hour. We'd just made the decision to swim across the shallow reef flat and get to the beach when it finally turned up. It was about this time I decided I needed my own proper liveboard dive boat.

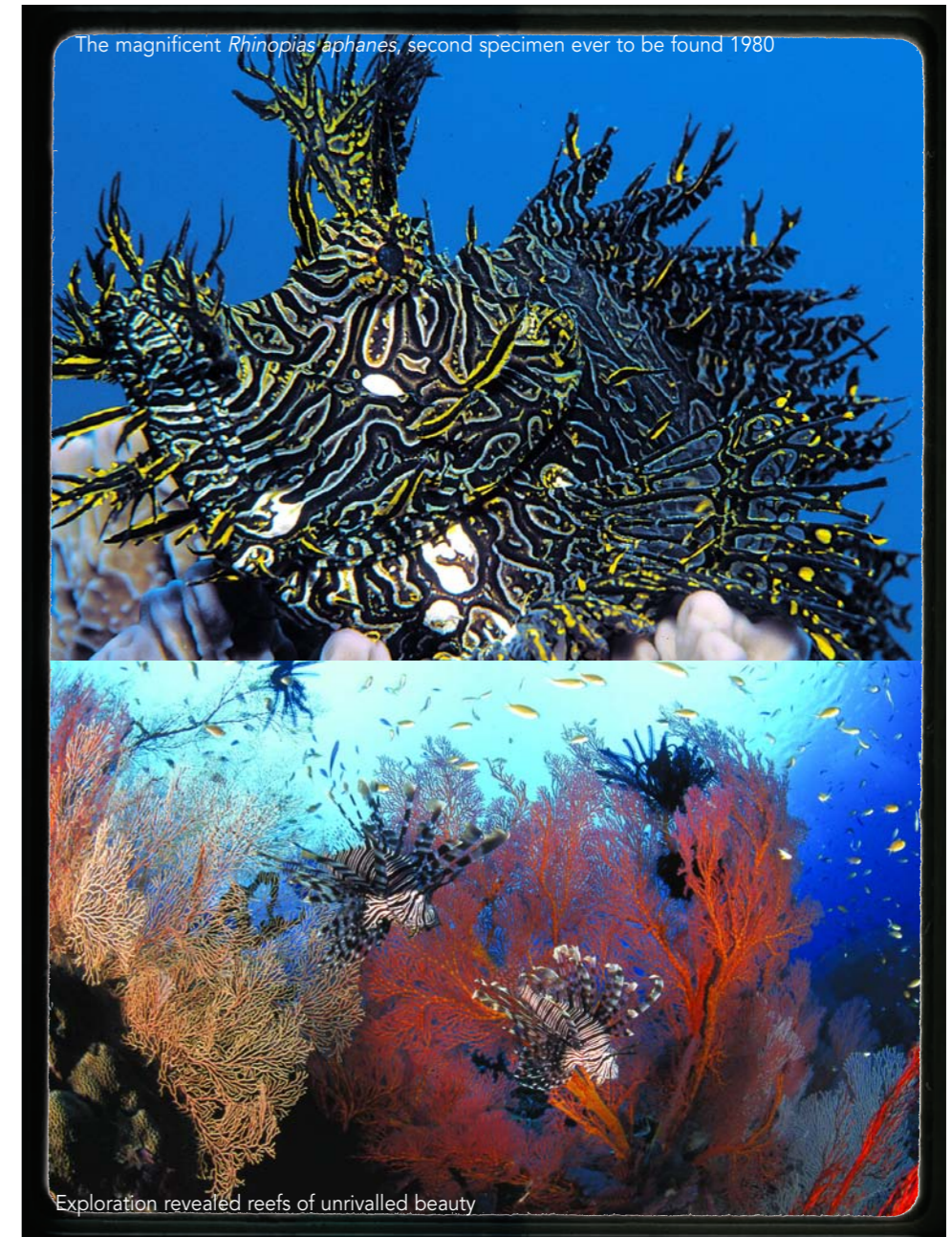
No sooner had we re-boarded the *Melanesian Explorer* than the boat went off again with land tourists aboard. As they moved away, Orcas appeared right behind them. No boat was available for us so we hurried into the water with snorkeling gear but were unable to catch up. I seem to remember banging my head on the ship more often after that missed opportunity.

We were starting to build a logbook of good dive sites, but when you're exploring you have to expect some duds. Coral reefs aren't monuments; they have life cycles and, from time to time, may be in poor health. I've seen reefs totally barren after a storm, or after crown of thorns starfish infestation, but, after a few years of rapid re-growth, transform back into coral wonderlands.

Finding the right spot on a reef is important too. One site I'll never forgive

After 10,000 dives I've now spent more than a year actually underwater in PNG

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The magnificent *Rhinopias aphanes*, second specimen ever to be found 1980

Exploration revealed reefs of unrivalled beauty

myself for. With Carl wanting the very best diving I directed the *Melanesian Explorer* to Alcester Island in the Solomon Sea. This island is surrounded by deep clear water and a fringing reef. It has a splendid village on it and is one of the few places even today to still grow ebony timber. "For every tree we cut, we plant four", the proud village leader told us. I picked a point on the reef on the lee side of the island near the village so others could go ashore, and that was our dive site. It was very ordinary. Years later, when we had our own boat, I was able to spend more time exploring and checked

out a passage between the main island and a small islet to the east. It is one of PNG's great dives! A boat ride to the outer wall, into the prevailing current, puts divers into a maelstrom of fishes. Barracudas, jacks, surgeons, dogtoothed tuna, fusiliers, batfish all surging around against a pristine coral background in crystal water. After time with the fishes, divers make a leisurely drift back to the boat. It is a superb dive.

But early days were like that – we never knew what we'd find and barren dives are often next to fabulous dives. In Madang I helped Kevin Baldwin sink a worn out tugboat, the *Henry Leith*, because we thought it would make a super dive site next to a picturesque island. It does – but



Dinah at Horseshoe Marine Park 1980



China Strait viewed from Samarai Island



The Pacific Gas was sunk in 1986

we didn't know at the time that just a short distance away was the brilliant wreck of a B25 Mitchell aircraft from the War.

We also learned that it's difficult to predict the quality of a dive site just by looking at a chart, or even by looking at the reef from the surface. There's only one way to find out – you have to dive them all, and that is what I set out to do. We started building *Telita* (from beautiful PNG hardwoods) in Milne Bay in 1984 and in December 1986 she made her maiden voyage of discovery. In 1992 readers of USA *In Depth* magazine voted her the 'Best Live-aboard Dive Boat in the World'. We no longer own her but she is still providing wonderful diving adventures.

After 10,000 dives I've now spent more than a year actually underwater in PNG, and still have plenty of dive sites to explore and discover. There's a fleet of world class liveaboard dive boats operating in the country – *Barbarian 2*, *Chertan*, *Golden Dawn*, *FeBrina*, *Kamai*, *Spirit of Niugini*, *Star Dancer*, and *Telita*,

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and Papua New Guinea is one of the most highly regarded destinations for the world's top divers.

In January 2008 author Bob Halstead was inducted into the International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame

