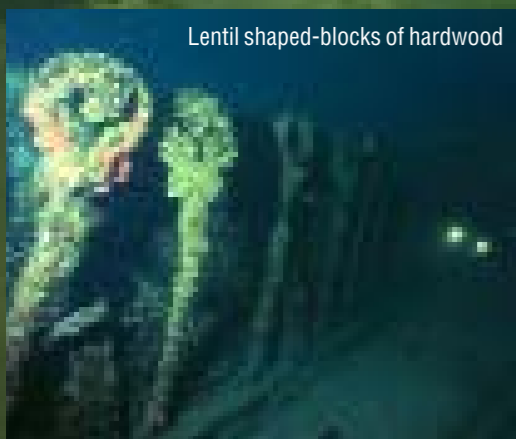


Inside the Tasman cockpit

:: TEXT AND IMAGES PIERRE LARUE



The propellor on the Selme Federsen



Lentil shaped-blocks of hardwood



THE STAR OF RUSSIA CLIPPER

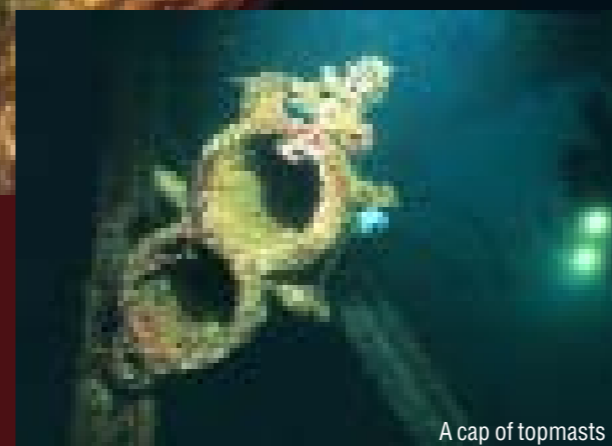
Peter Philipps, at the controls of Scuba Blue, takes off in the direction of the eastern end of Port Vila's calm, deep channel. It takes only ten minutes to reach the buoy marking our first wreck: the Star of Russia clipper. We descend vertically into the dark waters where the visibility is less than eight metres. Our guide, young Carl Muir, leads the way. A school of scads surrounds us, two friendly Platax teira batfishes escort us. Thirty metres down we level off in order to work our way comfortably along the beams of the upper deck. The interior of this large 84 metre steel sailing ship is easily reached because the floor has long disappeared – it rests 36 metres down on a bed of silt.

The imposing metal masts are lying on the port side. In this glaucous decor Christian stays in the background, with two projectors on to allow me to photograph a cap of topmasts. We move along a line of lentil-shaped blocks of hardwood, which were used to provide the necessary tension to the rigging which supported the masts against the straining sails. Before the foremast, we discover a capstan used by the sailors to turn by pushing on long bars to work the windlass below and bring up the anchor. We go down the length of the prow, shaped like a blade, then, half way down the hull towards the poop, we discover a chain at the end of which lies a modern 'claw' anchor, different from the original 'stock' one. We come up along the rudder blade as far as the wheelhouse: the steering mechanism is intact. At the tip of the endless screw, a bronze boss with eight notches is the sole reminder of the tiller wheel. We appreciate the privilege of being able to visit such a well conserved old sailing ship, built at the Harland & Wolff dockyards in Belfast in 1874. The Star of Russia, the ninth in a series of twelve, was intended for trade with India. On its maiden voyage it travelled from London to Calcutta in 97 days. In 1926 it was converted into a pontoon and renamed at Nouméa successfully Lapérouse, then Bougainville. It ended its career as a copra barge in the New Hebrides, finally giving up the ghost in 1956 after a cyclone.

THE SEAPLANE TASMAN

A few minutes by boat from the Star of Russia lies the Australian company QANTAS' 26 seaplane Sandringham Tasman. This 30

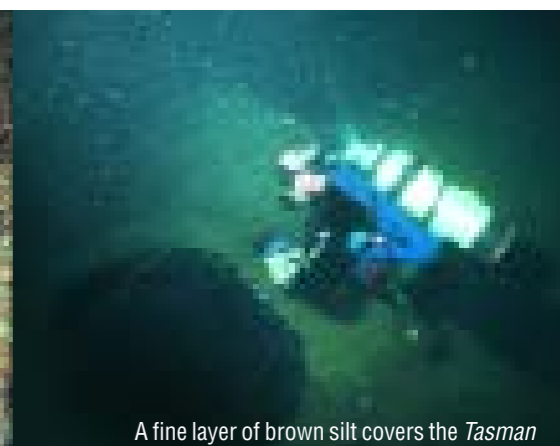
PORT VILA'S WRECKS



A cap of topmasts



The Selme Federsen wreck



A fine layer of brown silt covers the Tasman



The wheelhouse



The Selme Federsen wreck



Nautilus Scuba Centre in Port Vila



The Star of Russia clipper



The sinking of the Semle Federsen courtesy Nautilus Scuba archives



The capstan on the Selme Federsen wreck

metre wingspan aircraft, driven by four 1200hp engines, from 1950 onwards used to carry 33 passengers at a speed of 230 km/h between Australia, New Guinea, the New Hebrides and Fiji. It was the first plane to link Auckland with Sydney in less than nine hours! It sank in 1955 due to a succession of problems with one of its lateral floats. Our guide Peter Philipps tumbles down along the anchor line and the visibility diminishes rapidly, necessitating maximum care so as not to get lost. At a depth of 40 metres an Ariane's clew joins the mooring line to the plane's vertical empennage. The whole cabin is covered with a fine layer of brown silt. When we reach the wing socket, we notice the absence of engines (they were all removed,

Magazine spread courtesy Nautilus Scuba archives



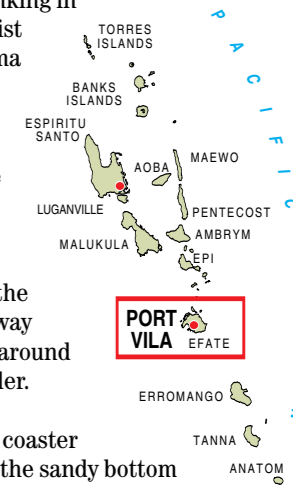
Courtesy FMC archives

at the time, for maintenance). We reach the cockpit via an opening in the canopy. Visibility inside is reasonable and allows us to see the instrument panel and the pilot's seats. Unfortunately, particles stirred up by our bubbles hit the ceiling quickly, obscuring the cockpit. In just a single dive, we won't have enough time to explore the passenger cabin, reached through large openings under the wings. Visiting this remarkable relic of Oceanian commercial aviation leaves us with a feeling of the unfinished. The special configuration of this dive requires a minimum of experience: but those suffering from claustrophobia should give this one a miss!

THE FREIGHTER SEMLE FEDERSEN

We finish our trip around the wrecks with the Semle Federsen. This sturdy freighter sailed around the Vanuatu archipelago until 1985, when it was declared unfit for service and condemned for scrap. The Maritime Services Department authorised its sinking in Mele Bay near the Pango coast as a shallow tourist dive site, but in 1987 a violent cyclone named Uma pushed the wreck down into the depths. After carefully taking his bearings Anthony, our young guide, jumps from the boat to tie up to a buoy just below the surface. We descend into the crystal clear water; the wreck appears to be placed upright on a steep slope with its bow pointing towards the abyss below. Forty metres down we reach the funnel, then we move under the load-bearing crossbeam and travel along a gangway decorated with small gorgonians. Our visit ends around the particularly photogenic three-bladed propeller.

We had enough time left to explore the 45 metre coaster *Konanda* which was purpose-sunk in 1987 on to the sandy bottom 25 metres down. This site is ideal for allowing novices to familiarise themselves with this kind of diving. In addition to these wrecks, with the Nautilus centre's team, divers can discover a dozen or more superb and diverse coral reef sites in the Mele Bay area and to the north of Efate as far as Hat Island, Paul Rock and Havannah Harbour.



Operating since 1978, Nautilus Scuba is the largest and the most experienced dive centre in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu. After welcoming us at Bauerfield International Airport, manager Peter Phillips drove us to our unit overlooking the harbour – opposite Irriki Island and close to the main shopping street. A team of young smiling, competent Australians manage the shop, where one can buy the best dive material at duty free prices. Down below, beginners receive their first lessons in a pool. At the private jetty, two boats, with equipment supplied, can move up 40 divers. Open water and Divemaster training is available from PADI and SSI instructors.

Left: Peter Phillips, Nautilus Scuba manager