



# For Just Ten Minutes with *Elwis*

Howard Sawyer

Patrick shouts loud enough to encourage the pilots in the open cockpit, “They say if you can fly here, you can fly anywhere!!” I smile and give him and partner Mario the thumbs up.

**W**e’re the only passengers aboard the De Havilland Twin Otter for the 45 minute flight from Moresby to Tufi. I’ve got all the port side window seats to choose from and no view from any of them. I crane my neck to see through the cockpit window. It’s no better up front, where they’re flying on instruments and have the windscreen wipers on.

After flying the soulless long haul for

days to get to Papua New Guinea, I was really looking forward to the Airlines PNG leg – flying affords the best views this country has to offer. There’s a real thrill clearing the tips of razorback ridges, seeing smoke curl up from the villages, acres of pristine treetop canopy, spectacular waterfalls, and the fringing reefs from the air. Real flying, in a light aircraft with propellers, over such a diverse, mysterious landscape evokes a

sense of The Golden Age of Travel.

It would be great if I could see it of course, rather than just feel it by the seat of my pants. Then, suddenly, as if by magic, we break through the clouds and at last I have my view. The pilots adjust their aviator shades, turn off the windscreen wipers, and start sharing mints in the afternoon sunshine.

The muddy ribbon of the Oro River puzzles its way to the sea as we descend



*Left: Fuselage of 'Black Jack'. Above: Nose of the 'Black Jack'. Right: 'Black Jack' radio man, George Prezioso on his 90th birthday. (courtesy Justin Taylan, Pacific Wreck database).*

into the boutique resort, leaving us with a leisurely stroll across the local playing field. There's a welcome cold sundowner on the deck to accompany a simply gob smacking panorama over the fjord, dominated by the majestic Trafalgar mountain range.

It's the Land That Time Forgot, Jurassic Park, and the Lord of the Rings all rolled into one. The trees climb towards you and sea eagles wheel above. From your balcony throne at the top of the world with a glass in your hand, you too could rule. If you haven't already done so, this is the moment to take a photograph for prosperity.

The resort can accommodate 38 guests between deluxe bungalows, standard rooms, and some singles for those on a limited budget.

There's an en suite with hot shower, a quality bed, and outside your room in the beautifully manicured gardens, a pool. The roundhouse has a bar, tea and coffee on tap, afternoon cake, table tennis, and even a TV to remind you, should you care, that the nine-to-five world is still out there. For the seriously determined, there's even a small gift



shop. And as if that's still not enough, the resort's toy dog and pet hornbill have regular playground altercations.

Tufi also arranges bush walking to take in local culture, flora and fauna, and canoes are available down at the dock if you want to go for a paddle in the fjord. But there's no pressure to do anything here. There's a stack of paperbacks, so you can kick back in a chair and pretend to read, or simply have a doze. Did I mention the view?

A former colonial outpost for the British, Tufi is physically isolated from

over spectacular equatorial fjords, to a landing strip that could double as a golf fairway. A skip, a trundle, the roar of the engines, and we come to a gentle halt without fuss at least thirty feet before the solid looking tree line.

Out on the strip, at 'Tufi International', I stretch my legs by jumping up and down like lunatic. At long last, I'm finally bouncing on the dot on the map I've been dreaming about for the past seven years.

'No worries' Matt leads the reception committee. Our luggage is portaged



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Story & Photos: **Howard Sawyer**



the rest of PNG. There are no roads in or out, so other than the three Airlines PNG flights a week, the only access is by sea. Consequently the area is sparsely populated and relatively untouched,

which adds to the aura.

The reason there are no roads in or out is because the peninsular is surrounded by swamp, a breeding haven for mosquitoes. Every evening the

*Above: Over the crash site of the B-17, off Boga Boga village. Below: Starboard side, B-17.*



resort staff brings out smoking coils, but inevitably, some still get through. Your best line of defence against the pests, who seem to have developed an immunity to various sprays, is to wear socks, a long sleeve shirt, and long trousers, with a closed shoe from late afternoon.

I've passed through a few of the top end resorts around PNG, and I have to say the food served at Tufi is more than a match for any. Meals are served either on the veranda of the main roundhouse, or down on the deck with the billion dollar view. Cuisine is a blend of local, Western and Japanese dishes, beautifully presented on square plates with drizzled sauces, complemented with reassuringly heavy cutlery. I catch myself loitering, waiting for the dinner bell.

A spacious dive shop lies at the bottom of the very steep hill. Dive master Glen efficiently sorts out the necessary paperwork and a crate for my kit. I take the boat for a couple of reef dives to check that all my equipment is functioning correctly before Saturday's signature dive.

I would have come all the way to Tufi for the wrecks of the P38 Lightning fighter, the B25 Mitchell bomber, or the much acclaimed yet seldom dived wreck of the Dutch merchant ship S'Jacob, but they're either out of season, out of range, or tied up in 'kustom fee' disputes. None of this matters, because what I've really



Right: Number 1 engine, starboard side.  
Far right: Number 1 engine, port side.

come for is the B-17.

The Flying Fortress B-17F-20-BO was assigned to the 5th Air Force, 43rd Bombardment Group, 63rd Bombardment Squadron 7 September 1942, under the command of Capt. Ken McCullar, a keen gambler, who nicknamed the bomber 'Black Jack', after the last two digits of the serial number (124521). A playing card motif of the Jack and Ace of Spades was painted on the starboard side of the nose.

But after McCullar was lost in another aircraft, it was Lt. Ralph De Loach who took the controls for take-off from 7 Mile (now Moresby's Jackson International airport) with an ad hoc crew for the bombing mission on the nights 10-11 July 1943.

Thirty minutes from the target they started to suffer severe engine problems, but pushed on to bomb Buna Canal, the largest Japanese airfield in Rabaul. On the return leg the starboard engine



started to vibrate to the point where the crew thought it would detach itself from the wing, the second starboard engine only had limited power, and then they



flew into a tropical storm and became lost.

De Loach later reflected that everyone of the ten man crew had

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*Above: Tail fin of the 'Black Jack'. Bottom right: Loading the Twin Otter for the return leg to Moresby.*

written themselves off. So many planes took off and never returned, the fate of their crews unknown, lost to sharks, the Japanese, or the jungle.

But they broke through the clouds, and attempted to ditch on a shallow reef, skipped over it, and came to rest in open water. The crew, braced for the impact in the radio room, escaped through the overhead hatch, while De Loach went out through the cockpit window.

The three injured crewmen were placed in the life raft and the locals from nearby Boga Boga village, who had been on their way to church when the plane crashed, paddled out in their canoes to rescue them from the current. 'Black Jack' sank in less than a minute. It would be forty three years before she'd be seen again. Christmas 1986: Wreck hunter Rod Pearce, together with David Pennefather and Bruce Johnson went looking for a large aircraft villagers said had crashed and sunk off Cape Vogel. The three fanned out as they dived over the reef, and Rod, diving on the right, pushed by the current, came through a field of sea whips around 40 meters and saw "a shape that didn't fit".

He came upon the huge tail, the fabric over the rudder rotted away. The nose had hit the white coral sand bottom first, and crumpled under impact, but

otherwise Black Jack had landed intact on the seabed at 48 metres. Even the guns in the turret behind the tail still moved in their mountings.

I watch the expatriates from Moresby arrive on the afternoon flight and we meet and greet at the bar for pre-dinner drinks. My whole trip to Papua New Guinea has been built around this dive on 'Black Jack', which Tufi resort offers as a charter dive with a minimum of six divers. As I've travelled here from the UK on my own, resort manager Simon Tewson has kindly arranged for me to join the expat's trip.

It's worth planning your dive trip to PNG with the same focus as you

would when planning your actual dive. I've found from experience that simply arriving at the dive centre closest to the wreck of choice does not guarantee a dive on it.

Some wrecks can only be dived at certain times of the year, due to seasonal weather conditions with tide and visibility. As with the 'Black Jack', some wrecks are only accessible as charter dives, for which operators will require a minimum number of divers to run the trip, some are only possible from liveboards, so unless you are an oligarch, you might need fellow divers to make up the numbers. E-mail your dive operator well in advance to check accessibility. It costs nothing to ask.

I must admit, I was perhaps a rather overzealous, obsessional planner, determined to avoid some of the disappointments I encountered on my first dive trip in PNG, but it all paid off when Simon gave me the 5am wake up call to go and dive 'Black Jack'. Like I wasn't up and dressed already!

It takes us over two hours at speed by banana boat to the wreck site, just off Boga Boga. Although we run through several squalls, it's set fair when we moor up.

Ten minutes later, I'm finning hard down towards the sunken B-17, and she is the most magnificent sight. I am in awe. The tail stands nearly seven metres high, dwarfing Glen, who watches the group descend. The plane is just over 20 metres in length, the wingspan over 30 metres, and as I travel towards the top gun turret I can see wing tip to wing tip. The glass is missing from the side window of the cockpit and it's incredible





to think De Loach squeezed through that tiny space to make his escape. The wreck is covered in light coral and sponge, beautiful when illuminated by the camera strobes; unfortunately the nose art is now lost.

I skirt across to the starboard side to the cause of the crash, the failure of the starboard engines. The propeller of number one engine is bent significantly more than the blades of number two, indicating the disparity in performance on impact.

Divers will debate the best shipwreck long into the night, using all manner of spurious arguments. 'Black Jack' will just sit there and be regal. It's the best plane wreck in the world bar none. This is Elvis, no question, but sadly my air gauge says that I have to leave the building. Right now.

I confess, I lingered, and I'm grateful that Glen has suspended a spare tank of air to cover this eventuality. 'Black Jack' is a deep dive, so ascent to the surface must be slow and controlled, and the spare air tank allows me to complete my recompression safely before I run out of air from the cylinder on my back.

The Moresby divers are enjoying their second dive on the B-17 this year. Having entered the fuselage through the large side doors, they are now trying to work out how to get into the cockpit.

If they'd seen 'Black Jack's Last Mission', the 1988 documentary by Steve Birdsall, on the plane's history, and De Loach's subsequent return to Boga Boga as a silver haired veteran, they'd know that Bruce Johnson managed it by removing the air tank from his back and steering it in ahead of him. This allowed him to squeeze past the bomb racks and into the cockpit. In



Above: Fjord below Tufi Resort.

doing so he became the first person to sit at the controls for over forty years.

I'll tell the Moresby crew this when we sit down for dinner. They'll have the chance to return and try again. The outline of the giant warbird fades away as I ascend towards the surface. I want to dive her again, but somehow I just know I never will.

#### Post Script

A couple of weeks after I returned home I received an email from Justin Taylan, the American historian and founder of the Pacific Wreck database.

"On Sunday I drove to Forked River, New Jersey, to see George Prezioso, the radio operator of 'Black Jack' who turned 90 on May 24th, for a party with his family and friends.

"As you can imagine, there was a big spread of Italian favourites and

although I'd interviewed him previously, I enjoyed him reminiscing about his pet koala bear, and his one love, an Australian nurse named Lorna, who died later in the war. George never married, and claims he lived so long 'because he had no wife to nag him'.

"With the passing of so many veterans, it is amazing to share time with George. He is in excellent health. He wears no glasses, aside for reading, walks without a cane, and drives himself around, including Atlantic City twice a month to gamble. Yes, his favourite game is Black Jack. He still wears the 5th Air Force pin on his collar.

"I showed him your photos from the dive. He was very pleased to see 'his' B-17, and said it was the perfect gift and to pass along his 'thank you' to you!" ■

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