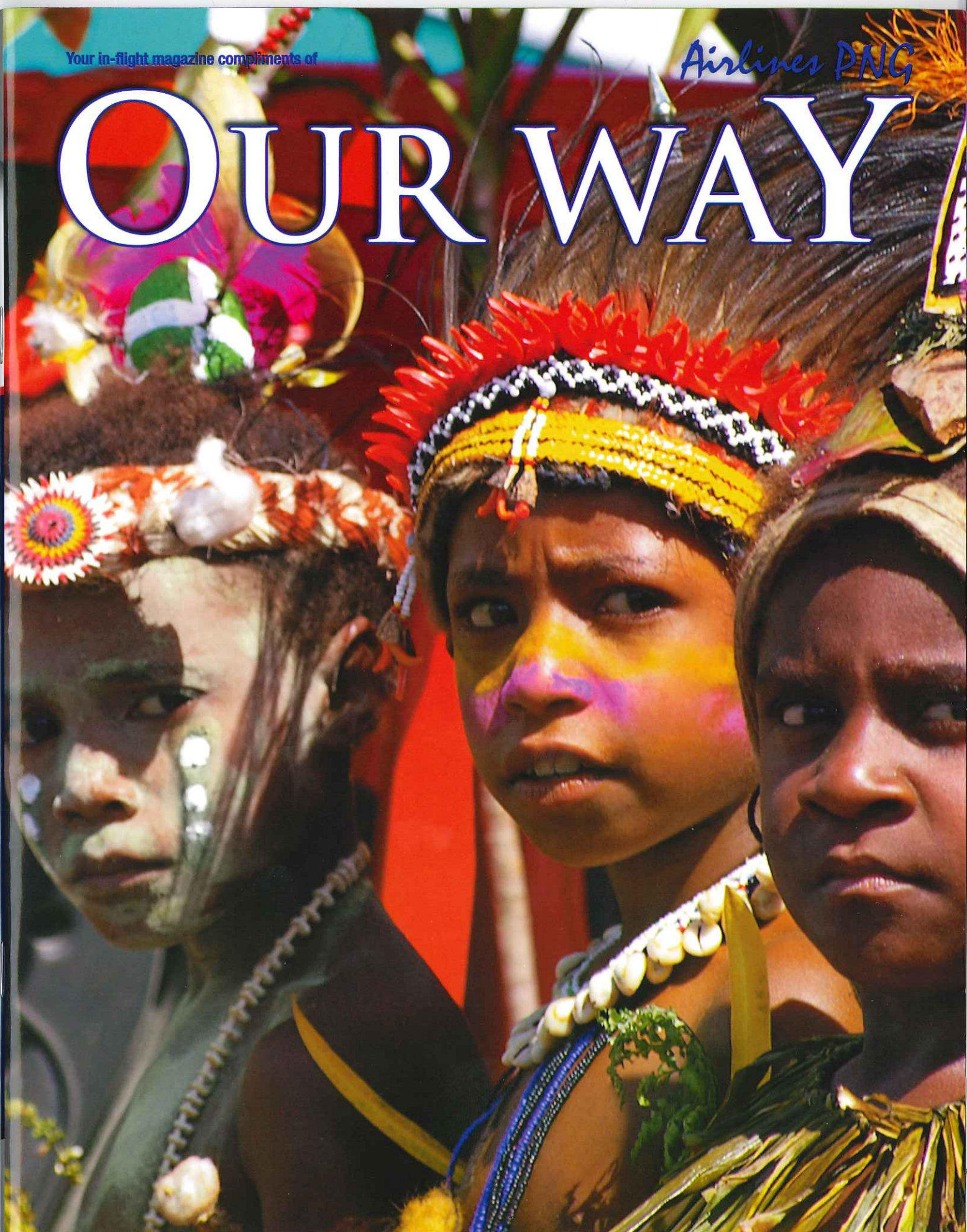


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Volume 18

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Revisiting RABAUL

Howard Sawyer

...a desolate wasteland, ruled by an angry volcano.

Why would I go there? Why on earth would I go back? Seven years on, I chomp at the bit.

The last of the minibuses laden with locals crawls away. They smile and wave, and I sense their empathy at my predicament. I'm standing alone outside the airport terminal, and we all know I've been stood up.

So that's the public transport gone, and it will be pitch black in two hours at a guess. My UK mobile phone searches in vain for a network. Back inside the now deserted terminal, I approach the biggest chap still working there, and he telephones for me. Pidgin chatter.

"They're expecting you, my friend. You arrive here tomorrow."

He smiles. We laugh. I'm back in Rabaul.

Half an hour later the airport staff wave goodbye from their pick-up, and leave me in the plush surroundings of the Kokopo Beach Bungalow Resort. I'm given the guided tour of the grounds and facilities,

and shown their beautiful beach, and panorama, dominated by the smoking volcano on the horizon.

Stephen Woolcott arrives in his trusty Hilux, apologising profusely, (and needlessly), for the mix up and no-show at the airport. I thank the staff for their hospitality and we hit the rambling road towards Kabaira Beach Hideaway.

Originally a half way house between the Woolcott family plantation across Ataliklikun Bay and Rabaul town, Kabaira provides a much-needed year-round diving infrastructure for the area. Kabaira started as a resort in 2003. The few high-end resorts, such as the one I've briefly toured, cater primarily to industrial and political guests, rather than divers travelling on a budget.

The Woolcotts have continued to integrate themselves into the local community in an effort to get the villagers onside with developing tourism

Artefacts in the Rabaul Club.



Jumping from The Beehives.



Ki-21 'Sally' bomber wreck off the old Lakunai airstrip.

in the area. This is not without the odd setback. Stephen dived a new site, and a rumour spread like wildfire among local villages that he'd discovered a wreck full of diamonds and oil.

"So what did you do with the diamonds?"

Stephen smiles and plays along.

"Well I had to give them back."

"You kept the oil, though?"

"Oh yeah, I kept the oil!"

It's dark when I arrive, but I'm welcomed into the family home like an old friend. After a wonderful meal, a much needed shower, and a good sleep in a comfortable beach bungalow, it's time to dive. As the only guest, I have my pick of the sites, and opt for a trip round the coast to Simpson Harbour. The boat ride takes about ninety minutes, so I settle back, relax, and enjoy the fantastic scenery.

During WWII, the Japanese were

"The boat ride takes about ninety minutes, so I settle back, relax, and enjoy the fantastic scenery..."

looking for a base for their push south into the Pacific, and Rabaul, with its superb harbour formed from an old caldera, was exactly what they were looking for.

They mounted a full-blown invasion in January 1942. Overwhelmed, the token Australian force was either killed or captured; some braved the ravages of the jungle to escape.

The occupying Japanese soon had a garrison of over 100,000 personnel, with functioning airstrips and brothels. However in late 1943 the Allies launched

'Operation Cartwheel', bombing Rabaul on a regular basis, effectively blockading and neutralising the base as an offensive threat. The Japanese dug over 300 miles of tunnels in the surrounding hills and sat out the remainder of the war as the conflict moved on to other theatres.

So by the time of the surrender on 6th September 1945, the harbour was full of wrecks. Indeed fifteen were dived and described by Monica Foster and Peter Stone in their meticulously researched 'Rabaul's Forgotten Fleet', published in 1994, which, coincidentally, was the year

Tavurvur volcano.



the surrounding volcanoes erupted - and buried the lot under a thick blanket of ash.

Although Simpson Harbour is an old caldera, the volcanoes surrounding Rabaul are still active. Twin eruptions of Vulcan & Tavurvur volcanoes in 1937 claimed over five hundred lives and caused widespread devastation. They erupted again on 19 September 1994, after a mass evacuation, but this time destroyed both town and airport, forcing the effective abandonment of Rabaul.

Today, Rabaul is a bizarre ghost town. A handful of scattered buildings dot the surreal black landscape, and the tree-lined streets now only exist in faded photographs of what was once dubbed the prettiest town in the Pacific.

Matupit Island, at the base of Tavurvur, is home to a thousand strong community who stoically defy the volcanic rain and the authorities' attempts to move them. They got off lightly in 1994, but have not



Aircraft wreckage at the East New Britain Centre, Kokopo.

been so lucky since. When it's not falling on their heads from the sky, the ash is blown into their faces off the land.

Last time I was here, Tavurvur was sleeping, with only a lazy wisp of smoke to indicate it was even breathing. This time she's spewing a huge black column of ash into the sky, and it's spectacular. Dive guide Lloyd and the Kabaira boat boys don't even seem to notice, so I just sit hypnotised until we moor up over the wreck of the 5,859 ton freighter, Italy Maru.

She's responsible for my love affair with shipwrecks. I'd dived a few shallow impostors, but seven years ago here in Rabaul, the Italy was by far the biggest and deepest wreck I'd explored. I'd gone in slightly apprehensive, hand-over-hand down the line - and then, something magical happened. The wreck, with her jutting superstructure, twisted like a curious old face, suddenly stirred and reached up from the mud towards me.

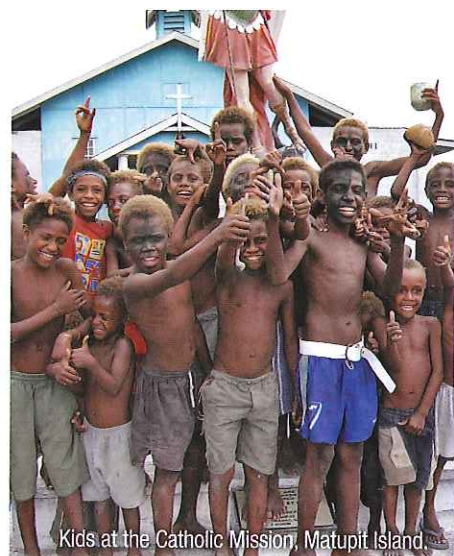
Usually, I feel like I'm caught in a tractor beam when descending, or a bug about to be splattered on the windscreen, the wreck suddenly looming large and unforgiving. But the sensation of a rusting hulk coming up to meet me hasn't overwhelmed me since diving the Italy Maru.

Today I'd love to tell you that the water in the harbour is gin clear for my reunion, that the wreck rises like Lazarus, but I'd be lying, because the visibility is dire and the Italy Maru doesn't so much as raise an eyebrow. It's like finning through ash soup, and although the water clarity was hit and miss before the 1994 eruption, today it's much worse than my initial dive in the harbour seven years ago. The recent eruption that closed the airport for weeks has contributed to a less than stellar return.

The boat boys spend elevenses jumping off the Beehives, a pair of giant volcanic plugs that rise from the harbour depths.



Matupit Island.



Kids at the Catholic Mission, Matupit Island.

*" Erupting volcano
on your right going
out ... Erupting
volcano on your left
coming in..."*

I decline their invitation to join them in certain death on the fringing coral below, happy to shout encouragement, in between mouthfuls of my Bento box lunch.

In an effort to find better visibility, I opt to dive the wrecks outside the harbour. We take to the coast road, past the catch for sale, chocolate box churches and neat village gardens, to dive what's left of the Iwate Maru. The wreck is hardly recognisable as a former water transport, having been heavily

Zero cockpit.



Zero fighter.



salvaged, leaving a fascinating junk yard of maritime bric-a-brac, minded by an inquisitive shoal of batfish.

The intact and much photographed Mitsubishi A6 M2 Zero fighter lying flush to the sand in 30m, some 500m off the volcanic beach along the Kokopo road is a real winner, as was the pilot who allegedly swam ashore and walked away after ditching. And there's not many shore dives where you can fin out on your back with the mantra, "Erupting volcano on your right going out ... Erupting

volcano on your left coming in."

The excitement isn't over. This is why I love Rabaul so. You just never know what you're going to see round the next corner, and in this case on our drive home, it's a group of young men carrying sticks. Stephen looks resigned, although I'm perversely thrilled, but it's merely a token local 'kustom fee' to recognise the voluntary road works the gang have carried out, filling in the pot holes.

There's no implication that the big sticks are there for retribution if you don't

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Portrait of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto.



Doorway to Yamamoto's bunker.



Ash filled passage in Yamamoto's bunker.



Lloyd on the bi-plane.



The Rabaul Bi-plane.

hand over a few coins in appreciation of their efforts, but as we smile, wave and drive on, there's no suggestion that they're going to fill in the other several hundred pot holes either.

But Stephen's mum has been driving the roads of Rabaul for years, and never had a problem. Even when she's broken down on her own at night ... there's always been someone on hand to help out.

"My mum had a flat tyre, and although she had a spare, she had no jack. No problem. They got more men, and physically lifted the car and changed the wheel for her!"

It's at this precise moment we run out of petrol and coast to a halt. Stephen looks sheepish as he calls his mum to run a jerry can of fuel out to her stranded son and his guest. I'm having a whale of a time, because this unscheduled stop offers a chance to meet some of the villagers and their young children, who

are fascinated by my blond hair.

I spend a day out of the water taking Kabaira's excellent land tour with local guide Augustine. Our first stop is to the rim of the giant crater that forms the harbour to visit the volcanic observatory off Tunnel Hill Road. The view is spectacular, and you can fully appreciate the grey ash 'map' of what once was the town. The observatory monitors all the volcanoes in the area, and although the on duty volcanologist shows me data to prove that Tavurvur's activity is subsiding since the 2006 eruption, she still looks pretty lively to me.

Built in 1933, The Rabaul Club was occupied by the Japanese Navy during the war until Allied bombing raids forced them to shelter underground. The club was rebuilt after the surrender, and again after the devastation of the 1994 eruption, so today it is one of the few buildings that dot the wasteland, and houses a small museum. Elaborate masks

worn by the Baining men for their ritual fire dance ceremonies, together with many photographs and artefacts from the war are on display here. The tail fin of a Zero fighter is the centrepiece exhibit.

We cross the road to enter Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's bunker. Here you can still see maps of the war zone etched onto the wall and ceiling, although much of the bunker is now inaccessible due to the build up of ash which has reduced corridors to little more than a crawl space. While the bunker may have served him well, Yamamoto was eventually killed in an air ambush by US P-38G Lightnings en route from Rabaul to the island off Ballale, near Bourgainville, on 18 April 1943.

The small road bridge that linked Matupit Island to the peninsular is still there; you can clearly see the capping stones that lined the sides. However the ash fall has been so prolific that the landscape is now level with the top of

Debris field, Iwate Maru.



Tank life.



the bridge on either side. The Catholic Mission is at the heart of this stoic community, who live in traditional huts and endure the ash on a daily basis. Now I really appreciate the noise from Tavorvur. I can see rocks being spat out from the crater.

Local kids clamber aboard our Hilux, thrilled to get a ride, however brief, and mug up for photographs. I even have a reunion with Rosemary Martin, whom I met while walking the remains of the Lakunai airstrip during my last visit. I brought some photographs I took that day, in the hope that I might meet her again. Rosemary says she will try to reunite these faces of yesteryear with the faces of today.

We break for lunch under the gazebo in the manicured grounds in front of the Japanese barge tunnels, set just off Karavia Bay. The tunnels were originally linked by rail tracks to other military installations, and although the tracks no

"I wouldn't say I was excited, but I kicked off the morning by trying to pull my 3mm wet suit on back to front, much to the crew's amusement..."

longer survive, the rusting barges lie nose to tail, deep into the cavernous vault, along with a resident bat population. A staircase leads to a gallery. I recommend bringing a torch.

The East New Britain Historical & Cultural Centre on the way to Kokopo is well worth a visit, the grounds outside jam-packed with war relics, and the two storey museum home to cultural artefacts, a comprehensive shell collection, and an extremely generous portrait of Yamamoto, where the conquering

Admiral bears a striking resemblance to Clark Gable.

We still have time to fit in a round of golf on the immaculately maintained course just down the road from Kabaira. Dive guide Lloyd turns out to be a very steady player, while Stephen seems content to drive the ball as far as possible. Our supply of golf balls is soon whittled down to one, and we take it in turns to stand in for the missing pins on the greens. Thankfully a couple of intrepid young caddies improve our game, finding

Tank at the Duke of York Islands.



Gun on the seabed, Iwate Maru.



Mitsubishi bi-plane at 28m.



Bi-plane cockpits.



new balls in the undergrowth, in return for a soda in the clubhouse afterwards. It's all great fun.

And so to the dive I came to Kabaira to do. I wouldn't say I was excited, but I kicked off the morning by trying to pull my 3mm wet suit on back to front, much to the crew's amusement.

The Main Event is the second dive of the day. First is George's wreck. Mystery surrounds the Japanese freighter and suspected minelayer to this day. She was named after George Tyers, the first European to dive her, and lies on a slope at approximately forty degrees. Without identification she has to be appreciated for what she is; an idyllic aquarium wreck, and being outside the harbour there's the added bonus of good visibility in spite of the plant detritus that floats on the surface.

The bow is at approximately 10m, and the stern at 60m. The skeletal deck, winches and railings are festooned with

"Peering inwards, the creature is the size of a cow. It's a terrific dive..."

a wide variety of soft corals. The aft hold at 45m contains a half dozen steel floats, some still whole. We zigzag back up over the wreck towards the forecabin, where Lloyd tells me there's a puffer fish of frankly ludicrous proportions. And he's not wrong. Peering inwards, the creature is the size of a cow. It's a terrific dive.

The boys take the boat round to a nondescript piece of coast line, just west of Cape Tawui, and moor up using landmarks of a single stumpy palm and a couple of protruding rocks. Unlike the harbour, you'd never guess what's down there.

We descend to a virtually intact upright Mitsubishi F1 M2 bi-plane at 28m.

The radio and machine gun behind the rear cockpit has been souvenired, and the main float under the 12m fuselage is slightly askew, but otherwise it's like a beautiful model aeroplane in a surreal setting.

The criss-cross wires between the wings are sprayed and flecked with soft coral and crinoids. Indeed under torch light or the strobe, nature has decorated the plane with the most incredible paint finish. Fin up the sediment in front of the propellers, then hang back, and she could be flying through the clouds again. This is a unique gem for the wreck diver's portfolio.

Stephen wants to show me his reef dives and the critters that live there. He says they're really something special, and I'm sure they are, but my time is up, and sadly I have to leave. He'll get the opportunity next time, because Rabaul's a magical place, Kabaira feels like home, and I'm definitely coming back. ▲

Howard Sawyer

For prices and bookings contact
Dive Adventures
sydney@diveadventures.com.au
Or see their web site

www.diveadventures.com.au

For more details on Kabaira, see their
web site at www.kabairadive.com.pg



One of two tanks in 5m of water.



Soft coral on George's Wreck.