



DIVING THE HOLY GRAIL
Story & Photos: Don Silcock



The flight was a troubled one as problems with both of the right wing engines had developed during the flight to New Britain, however DeLoach, with his crew of nine, managed to reach Rabaul and successfully deliver their bombs on target. DeLoach turned the plane around

“...An avid gambler gave *Blackjack* its moniker from the last two digits of its serial number - a jack and an ace is a “blackjack hand” of 21...”

to return to Port Moresby, but on the way back ran into a violent storm on approach from the coast of New Guinea to the northwest of Cape Nelson, a situation he later described as “the blackest of black nights...the worst flying weather I’d ever seen in my life”.

With two engines badly malfunctioning, it was impossible to hold the plane on course for Port Moresby and cross the Owen Stanley’s, and so *Blackjack* was turned southeast down the coast towards Milne Bay. They made it as far as Cape Vogel where, with virtually no fuel left, the decision was taken to ditch *Blackjack* on the shallow reef that runs parallel to the white sand beach at Boga Boga. Never having ditched a bomber before, DeLoach handed the controls over to his co-pilot Joseph Moore, who had. Moore managed to put the plane down but overshot the reef flat and ended up over the deep water where the plane floated briefly before sinking down to the sandy seabed some 50m below. There was just enough time for the 10-man crew, three of whom had been injured in the landing, to get out before *Blackjack* sank and they managed to get to shore with the aid of local villagers who had seen the plane come down.

An Australian Coastwatcher named Eric Foster also saw the crash landing and

Diving the Holy Grail

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Above: The wreck of the *Blackjack* sits serenely and eerily intact at 50m; Inset: The artwork on *Blackjack*'s fuselage; and the radio call plate that led to the wreck's identification

Lying undisturbed in the deep water, just off the fringing reef from the remote village of Boga Boga on the tip of Cape Vogel, is what many consider to be the greatest aircraft wreck in the world. The wreck is the B-17F “*Blackjack*”, serial number 41-24521, and one of the first B-17F Flying Fortress bombers built at the Boeing factory in Seattle during WWII.

The History
The completed plane was delivered to the US Army in July 1942 at a cost of \$314,109 and subsequently flown to Australia, from where it joined the war in the Pacific in early September with the 43rd Bombardment Group,

63rd Bombardment Squadron in Port Moresby. The plane was assigned to Captain Kenneth McCullar and his crew

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of nine, and served with distinction over the next few months. It was McCullar, an avid gambler, who gave *Blackjack* its moniker from the last two digits of

its serial number – a jack and an ace is a “blackjack hand” of 21 in the card game of Pontoon. Captain McCullar was quite a pilot and one who was highly regarded and decorated for his bravery, but who was unfortunately killed in April 1943 when another B-17 he was commanding crashed during takeoff from Port Moresby. In his obituary, the commander of the 5th US Air Force commented on McCullar’s bravery and leadership skills and said, “he was a master at the art of sinking Japanese ships”. It was McCullar at the controls of *Blackjack* that developed the potentially dangerous but devastating technique of “skip bombing”, credited in his sinking of the Japanese Kagero Class destroyer

Hayashio on the night of November 24, 1942, in the Huon Gulf. That attack left *Blackjack* so badly damaged it was out of action for two months and, when it returned to service, it was under the control of McCullar’s co-pilot Lt. Harry Staley, who had taken over from McCullar when he was promoted to Squadron Commander in January 1943. *Blackjack* performed equally well under Staley until he completed his tour of duty and handed the plane over to its next and final pilot Lt. Ralph DeLoach.

The Final Flight
Blackjack's final flight was on July 10, 1943, when it left 7-Mile Aerodrome in Port Moresby just before midnight on a mission to bomb the heavily fortified Japanese airfields at Rabaul in New Britain. The plane’s course took it southeast down the coast before it turned northeast over the Owen Stanley Range and Dyke Ackland Bay to the Solomon Sea and on to New Britain. On reaching Kimbe Bay on the north coast it changed course again and headed east to Rabaul.



Above: Archie from Tufti Dive hovers above *Blackjack's* tail; Below: *Blackjack's* rear gun.



informed air-sea rescue to dispatch an RAAF seaplane to evacuate the wounded. The rest of the crew were rescued two days later when a US Navy PT (Patrol Torpedo) boat arrived to take them to Goodenough Island, where they were flown back to Port Moresby then given

two weeks' leave in Sydney before returning to full combat duty. The pilot Ralph DeLoach and co-pilot Joseph Moore were subsequently awarded Silver Star medals, with some other members of the crew receiving the Bronze Star or Oak Leaf Cluster for their

parts in the overall mission and getting the plane down. *Blackjack* on the other hand lay largely forgotten on the sea floor and remained undisturbed there for another 43 years.

The Discovery

The discovery of *Blackjack* reads like something out of an adventure novel, with three Australians – Rod Pearce, Bruce Johnson, and David Pennefather - stumbling on the wreck almost by accident in late December 1986. Pennefather, an ex-Kiap who spent most of his adult life in PNG and developed a strong interest in WWII wrecks, had visited the Cape Vogel area earlier in 1986 and had heard from the villagers of Boga Boga that a plane had crashed near their reef during WWII. He subsequently organised a Christmas dive trip with Rod and Bruce to try to find what they believed was an Australian Beaufort A9.

Rod Pearce is the owner of the MV *Barbarian*, a small liveaboard dive boat

synonymous with wreck diving in PNG, and Bruce Johnson was a commercial pilot. The villagers of Boga Boga guided the three divers to the general location where the plane had gone down and, when they entered the water, the game plan was to spread out and cover as much area as possible in order to find it. It was Rod who found the wreck first, spotting the large tailplane as he conducted his search. One can only imagine the sheer exhilaration he must have felt when he first saw the B17 Flying Fortress sitting there on the sand

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in almost perfect condition. For someone who has dedicated his life to wreck diving, it must have been like finding the Holy Grail... Over the next few days they dived the



Blackjack's cockpit and one of its four engines

wreck as much as its depth of nearly 50m would allow, entering the inside of the plane and finding the Radio Call Plate with the 24521 serial number on it, which later allowed them to positively identify it as the famous *Blackjack*. Bruce also managed to satisfy his intense desire to reach the cockpit, which meant finding

his way through the dark bomb bay and many dangling control cables, to become the first person in more than 40 years to sit in the pilot's chair.

***Blackjack* Documentary**

So unique was the discovery of *Blackjack* that it led to a documentary being

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Above: The inspection hatch and way into Blackjack – Don't go there....



Left: The damaged nose cone showing the impact of the plane's crash landing

made the following year by a team of nine Australian divers and underwater cameramen along with Rod Pearce, Bruce Johnson, and David Pennefather. Making a documentary about a plane wreck in a remote location in 50m of water is a significant undertaking. Getting the footage required eight months of detailed planning, major logistic support from Rod on MV *Barbarian*, and two teams of divers diving for eight days. Australian aviation writer Steve Birdsall added an interesting aspect to the

film when he managed to find Ralph DeLoach, the last pilot of *Blackjack*, in Marina del Rey, California. DeLoach had completed his service at the end of WWII and returned to civilian life where he went on to become one of the famous Marlboro Men – the advertising icons created by the tobacco company Phillip Morris to sell their Marlboro cigarettes. Birdsall arranged for the then 69-year-old DeLoach to return to Cape Vogel, where he was reunited with some of the villagers who had helped get him and

his crew safely to shore when *Blackjack* was ditched in 1943. The completed film, *Blackjack's Last Mission*, was highly successful and shown on television around the world. The film is still available on DVD today.

Diving the *Blackjack*

The really special thing about the *Blackjack* is the fact she is still intact and sitting on a sandy seabed in clear blue waters with visibility that can easily reach 40m plus – it's almost like diving a set from a Hollywood movie. The nose is badly crumpled from the impact of the crash-landing and the propellers on the four engines are somewhat twisted, but the rest of the plane is predominantly in perfect nick, which is quite remarkable after almost 70 years underwater. Apparently the plane sank within 45

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seconds of coming to a halt and the crew only just had time to scramble out with the three wounded members. Which meant that apart from two waist guns and the radio transmitters, which were jettisoned prior to ditching, *Blackjack* took all its contents with it to the sea floor. Pearce, Johnson, and Pennefather found machine guns still in their turrets with hundreds of rounds of ammunition in the tracks to the guns and the twin tailguns could still be moved freely in their mounts. The other significant point about the *Blackjack* is that at nearly 50m depth she is at the very limits of recreational diving and, although it's a straightforward dive inasmuch as the water is clear and without major hazards or obstructions outside of the plane, decompression and bottom time are critical to a safe overall experience. Two divers are reported to have lost their lives diving *Blackjack* since it was discovered in 1986 so it has to be said this is a dive only for the experienced and competent. A permanent guideline from the shallow reef will lead you down the slope, where



Clockwise from left: The villagers of Boga Boga welcome the Tufi Dive boat; *Blackjack's* final pilot Lt. Ralph DeLoach returning to Boga Boga in 1987; The crew of *Blackjack* circa 1942 (Lt. Ralph DeLoach without a shirt); Village child in Boga Boga



How To Dive *Blackjack*

- Tufi Dive Resort www.tufidive.com takes the two-hour trip across Collingwood Bay from Cape Nelson to Boga Boga, but will need good weather. Tufi Dive visits the *Blackjack* regularly on special request. I dived *Blackjack* with Tufi Dive and both Glenn and Archie, the dive leaders at the resort, know the wreck well and how to dive it safely.
- Rod Pearce www.niuginidiving.com includes *Blackjack* in his wreck diving specials on his boat MV *Barbarian*. You can combine diving the wreck with meeting one of the men who discovered it!
- Craig de Wit on MV *Golden Dawn* www.mvgoldendawn.com includes *Blackjack* as part of the Milne Bay itinerary the boat does at certain times of the year. I first dived *Blackjack* from *Golden Dawn* back in about 2001. Craig also knows the wreck well and how to dive it safely.

at around 15m you will be able to see the wreck below you. Usually a fairly strong current sweeps along the slope so the line provides a useful guide and reference point – particularly so on the way back. The line descends quite close to the huge tail of the wreck, from where you can fin to the front of the plane to take in its full size. Entry into the plane is possible but, given the depth of the wreck, the extreme likelihood of nitrogen narcosis, and all the potential hazards inside, only the most foolish would even consider doing that – just don't go there. A much safer option is having a look inside the open windows of the cockpit. The current is usually strongest out in front of the plane

and swimming against it will increase your air consumption even more, so take great caution with your air supply and retain half a tank for the ascent and inevitable deco stop on the rope. ■

Don Silcock
www.indopacificimages.com