



The Zero wreck sits serenely in its final resting place in Kimbe Bay, Papua New Guinea

Text and photos by Don Silcock

As the story is told around the bar at Walindi, the day the wreck of the Zero fighter was found was soon after a small plane had crashed on take-off from Hoskins Airport at Kimbe Bay. So, when local villager, William Nui, saw the wreck laying on the sandy sea floor, he thought he had found the wreckage of the recent crash—not that of a WWII Japanese fighter plane that had remain undisturbed for nearly 60 years!

That the wreck was actually spotted in the first place is an interesting story in itself, because William was freediving for sea cucumbers at the time and noticed what seemed to be a large shadow on the sea bed.

Like many people in Papua New Guinea (PNG), William is very superstitious and thought that he was looking at a ghost lying face up with its arms outstretched, soaking up the sun. Terrified he shot to the surface and to the relative safety of his canoe, eventually summoning up enough courage to go back down to take a closer look, realizing that it was actually the wreck of a plane rather than some demon of the deep.

William took his story to the local authorities, and word of the discovery made it to Max Benjamin, the owner

of Walindi Plantation Dive Resort, who was rather dubious but felt that the story should be checked out, and the rest, as they say, is history...

A legendary aircraft

The Mitsubishi Zero fighter was to the Japanese military during WWII what the

Spitfire, or Hurricane, was to the British, or the Grumman F4 Wildcats and F6 Hellcats were to the United States, a remarkable fighting machine.

It achieved legendary status initially because of its role during the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. At that time, the

United States had nothing that could outfight it because of the Zero's exceptional speed and manoeuvrability. But it was the Zero's eventual role as the transport of choice for the infamous Kamikaze (Divine Wind) suicide pilots that ingrained it into the psyche of a generation.

More than 3,000 volunteer pilots, some

as young as 17, gave their lives in what they believed were divine missions to protect Japan. It was a devastating and demoralizing strategy, but one that eventually failed due to the rapidly declining manufacturing capability of Japan compared to the overwhelming capacity developed by the United States.

Kimbe Bay's Zero Wreck





Zero

A fully restored Mitsubishi Zero in flight (left). The location of the Zero Wreck in Kimbe Bay (below)

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AVIATION HISTORY MUSEUM



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Front end of Zero wreck; Koreans drafted into service as Kamikaze suicide pilots (below)



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A Kamikaze Zero about to crash into an Allied vessel in WWII

Initially, the Kamikaze attacks were on an ad-hoc basis when Japanese planes were hit and then deliberately crashed into Allied ships in a final attempt by the pilot to inflict as much damage as possible. But in October 1944, the Japanese Naval Air Force deployed specially modified Zeros from Air Group 201 in the Philippines in the Battle of Leyte. Before the war ended, a total of 49 Allied ships had been sunk by Kamikaze attacks.

History

When Max Benjamin first dived the Zero, he found it in quite remarkable condition, especially since it had

been underwater for almost 60 years at that point in time. There were no signs of bullet holes or other combat damage that would have indicated the plane having been shot down, rather the 'off' position of the throttle lever and the pitch control set to reduce air speed clearly pointed to a controlled landing in the sea.

The probability being that the pilot had got lost and ran out of fuel—a relatively common occurrence as WWII progressed—a fact

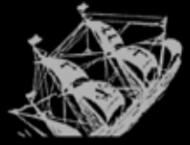


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confirmed by Japanese records showing that in 1942 only ten Zero pilots had been shot down in air combat, while 16 had disappeared due to "unknown causes".

Max and his wife, Cecilie, are both very knowledgeable about the history of WWII in PNG and were fascinated by the newly found wreck in their backyard. So, they tried to piece together the history of the plane using a combination of factual Japanese military war time records and anecdotal stories from local villagers.

The aircraft's serial number and date were still visible on the wreck,



and military records showed that the plane went missing during the battle of Cape Gloucester on West New Britain on 26 December 1944. The pilot on that day was Tomiharu Honda, but his fate remains a mystery, although a local story suggests that the native people helped get him to the nearby village of Talasea. What happened after that remains a mystery.

Given the sacrifices made by the Kamikaze Zero pilots and the way the Japanese military venerated them, losing a plane due to navigational errors would have been a very significant loss of honour, and one theory is that the pilot could not face this and spent the rest of his life in the jungles of New Britain. An alternative, but slightly more gruesome theory is that he ended up as the main course of a ceremonial feast for a head hunting tribe—a practice still common in those days.

Either way, while Tomiharu Honda's navigation skills may not have been per-

fect, there is no doubt that he could certainly fly the Zero well and performed a flawless ditching, which inflicted virtually no damage to the plane and brought it to rest just 50m from the shoreline. As divers, we can be thankful for those skills because the Kimbe Bay Zero wreck is a superb example of the genre.

Diving

The Zero wreck is located off the northern end of the Willaumez Peninsular—which affords much of Kimbe Bay its protection from the elements—in a small bay close to the popular South Emma's dive site. Laying in just 17m of water, the wreck is easily dived, and bottom time is not a big issue, although its location close to the shore means that it is best dived when there have been several days of no rain, as run-off can make the visibility fairly limited.

The plane sits serenely on the sandy bottom and is covered with a light marine growth with numerous small

barnacle-like hard coral growth on the wings and fuselage. The three blades of the single propeller are still very much intact and have a rich covering of sponges and some colourful coral. The fish life is concentrated around the open cockpit, which hosts a large anemone and a small colony of nemos just behind the pilot's seat.

The total length of the fuselage is just less than 10m, and the tip to tip wing-span is 12m. So, it's not a particularly big wreck.

The Zero is dived regularly by Walindi's day boats and the resort's liveaboard, *Febrina*, also visits the wreck from time to time.

Photography

If you are only going to dive the Zero wreck once, make it a fish-eye lens day, and if you don't have one, take your widest lens. The day I dived the wreck was four days after the last rain, so the water was quite clear. The very nice

ABOVE: Front and side views of the Zero wreck in Kimbe Bay, Papua New Guinea

American divers with whom I shared the boat that day kindly let me have 15 minutes on the site by myself before they entered the water. While other divers add a sense of scale to the wreck and an additional touch of drama, they are also highly likely to kick up the soft sand around the wreck as they explore it, and you can quickly see your National Geographic cover shot disappearing in the resulting gloom.

Good buoyancy control and no finning is the order of the day if you do get in first and head for the front of the plane near the propeller, get low (carefully) and fill the frame. I shot at ISO 500 on my D700 to allow me to use a small f stop for good depth of field with a reasonable shutter speed. ■

For more information, contact Don Silcock at: www.indopacificimages.com

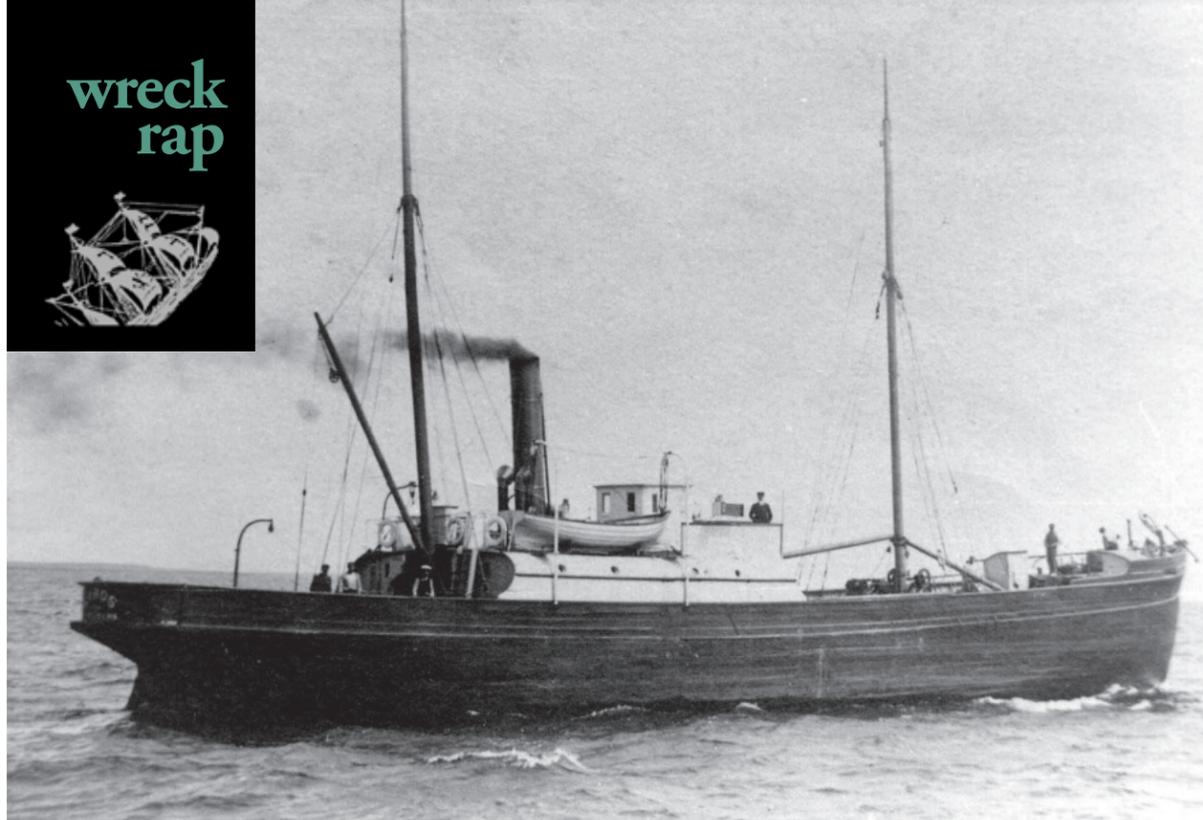
THE MITSUBISHI ZERO

The Mitsubishi A6M Zero-Sen was a very well designed aircraft that initially appeared to be almost invincible because of its tight turning radius and ability to outmanoeuvre Allied fighter planes.

As early as 1937, Claire Chennault, who later became the leader of the Flying Tigers warned the U.S. Air Force about the capability of the Zero and later told his wartime pilots, "Never try to turn with a Zero. Always get above the enemy and try to hit him with the first pass."

However, the Zero actually possessed many shortcomings, which were only to be revealed in mid-1942 when a virtually intact specimen was obtained by the U.S. military. A detailed analysis of that plane led to multiple improvements to the American planes the Grumman F4 Wildcat and the F6 Hellcat, which eventually meant that the Zeros were no longer the dominant plane in air combat.

More Mitsubishi Zeros were produced than any other wartime Japanese aircraft, with a total 10,094 fighter planes being built together with the 844 trainer and floatplane variants. ■



A German U-boat sank the Swedish steamship *SS Kyros* in 1917 while she was transporting a precious cargo of cognac

Wreck with cargo of precious cognac located in the Baltic

The 220-tonne Swedish steamship, *Kyros*, that was carrying hundreds of bottles of cognac and liqueurs when it was torpedoed by a German U-boat in 1917 has been located by Finnish divers.



The vessel rests at a depth of 80 meters and appears to be free of sediment. According to some reports, it was carrying a mixed cargo including steel products and as many as 1,000 bottles of cognac and 300 bottles of liqueur.

The wreck was located by divers from the Finnish group, Raumanmeren Hylky-Team, who say the vessel has remained quite intact. They will decide whether to try to raise the contents after closer examination. "The conditions down there

are extremely difficult," said diver Pasi Rytkönen, quoted in the Norwegian dive magazine, *Dykking*. "The ship is quite intact, but has slowly begun to collapse, and there is also much silt. In other words, it is not a simple matter retrieving any artefacts."

According to information on the Finnish Wikipedia, the wreck was already located in 1996 by a team led by Rytkönen, but the find was not publicised until February 2012. So far, the wreck has only been examined by a Remote Controlled Vehicle (ROV) ■

Does WWII wreck contain \$3 billion worth of platinum and whose is it?

Treasure hunter Greg Brooks of Maine is confident that he has located the shipwreck of the *Port Nicholson*, a British freighter, which secretly carried 71 tons of platinum when it was torpedoed by a German U-boat in 1942 off the coast of Cape Cod.

American treasure hunter Greg Brooks of Sub Sea Research in Gorham, Maine, announced that a wreck found sitting in 213 meters (700 feet) of water 80 kilometers (50 miles) offshore is that of the *S.S. Port Nicholson*, and said that a U.S. Treasury Department ledger shows that a huge fortune of platinum bars were on board, as part of a payment from the Soviet Union to the United States for war supplies when it was sunk by a German U-boat during WWII.

Doubts

However, some doubt his claim. Anthony Shusta, an attorney representing the British government, said it is unclear if the

ship carried platinum. "We're still researching what was on the vessel," Shusta told the Associated Press news agency. "Our initial research indicated it was mostly machinery and military stores." And if it was laden with precious metals, he said, who owns it could become a matter of international dispute.

Others believe that if it was indeed carrying such a fortune, it was most likely salvaged a long time ago. But Brooks said he has underwater footage, which he said shows a platinum bar surrounded by 30 boxes that he believes hold platinum ingots.

Maritime law on ownership are complicated and owner-

ship rights are still unsettled. Sub Sea Research filed an admiralty claim in Portland and was named custodian of the wreck by the U.S. Marshal Service. In early 2009, the treasure hunters fulfilled their obligation to buy legal notices in newspapers across the country announcing that they'd found the *Port Nicholson* and offering a 30-day window for anyone with a legitimate claim to the ship to step forward, Brooks said.

To the BBC, Shusta has stated that the United Kingdom will wait until salvage operations begin before deciding whether to file a claim on the cargo. ■



File photo of the *SS Port Nicholson*, sunk in 1942, which Greg Brooks of Sub Sea Research believes he has now found, sitting 50 miles (80km) off the U.S. Atlantic coast





File photo of the now former Portuguese corvette *Oliveira e Carmo*, which is one of four decommissioned Navy vessels to be sunk off the Algarve coast

Four warships destined as artificial reefs wrecks off Southern Portugal

The four decommissioned Portuguese warships will form the largest single artificial reef structure in the world and provide an ideal substrate for new marine life.

The Ocean Project Revival has created with two main objectives: to promote biodiversity and to create an exceptional diving destination. To this end and for the first time, four vessels connected by a common history will be deliberately sunk in the same place.

Marked by buoys, the Ocean Revival reef will consist of four decommissioned vessels from the Portuguese Navy.

- The 45-meter-long ocean patrol vessel *Zambeze*
- The 85-meter corvette *Oliveira e Carmo*
- The 64-meter hydrographic survey vessel *Almeida Carvalho*
- The 102-meter long frigate *Hermenegildo Capelo*

The artificial reef will be situated approximately one mile off the coastal town of Portimao in southern Portugal at depth between 26 and 32 meters. This location has been selected because the diving conditions are usually very good with good diving more than 300 days a year.

In addition, the local infrastructure is well suited to support diving including a hyperbaric chamber. Portimão's harbour and marina offer excellent facilities and lies close to a number of other prime diving sites such as shipwrecks of the 18th century, or WWI and WWII wrecks, natural reefs and walls.

The vessels are scheduled to be sunk over a period of 14 months period, with a sinking every three to four months. Each

sinking will be an attraction in itself and will be accompanied by a show of fireworks.

The area will also feature an exhibition center, where the history of the sunken fleet will be documented with drawings, photos and films of the ships, the chronology of its career and documents about its historical context.

Southern Portugal is reached from most of Europe in less than three hours by plane and well connected by motorways, so the organisers have high hopes that the new artificial wrecks will make the region a new highlight for diving enthusiasts from all over the world. ■

Sixteenth century wreck discovered off Brazil

A team of Brazilian archaeologists and divers who discovered the remains of a Spanish vessel off the southern state of Santa Catarina say the recovered fragments correspond to a shipwreck that occurred in 1583, the *Latin American Herald Tribune* reports.

The first recovered fragment from this latest find was a stone with a high-relief shield of two lions and two castles with a Portuguese symbol in the center. That shield dates back to the kingdoms of Leon and Castile and the 1580-1640 Iberian Union, when the monarchies of Spain and Portugal

were unified. The divers also recovered a triangular plaque dated 1582 and containing the name of Spain's King Philip II. According to investigators, the plaque may have been an emblem that navigators used to lay claim to territories they had explored for the first time. ■

SOURCE: THE LATIN AMERICAN HERALD TRIBUNE

Half-billion dollar treasure makes it to Spain—after 300 years

After five years of legal wrangling, the treasure is finally going back—treasure that the Florida-based Odyssey Marine Exploration salvaged from the wreck of the Spanish frigate *Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes*, which was sunk by British warships near the port of Cadiz in 1804 killing 249 people and taking a treasure with

an estimated value of half a billion dollars with it to the seabed. Spain had argued in court that it, not the salvage company, was the rightful owner of the cargo and the ship. On February 17, a U.S. judge ordered that the coins be returned to Spain from Florida.

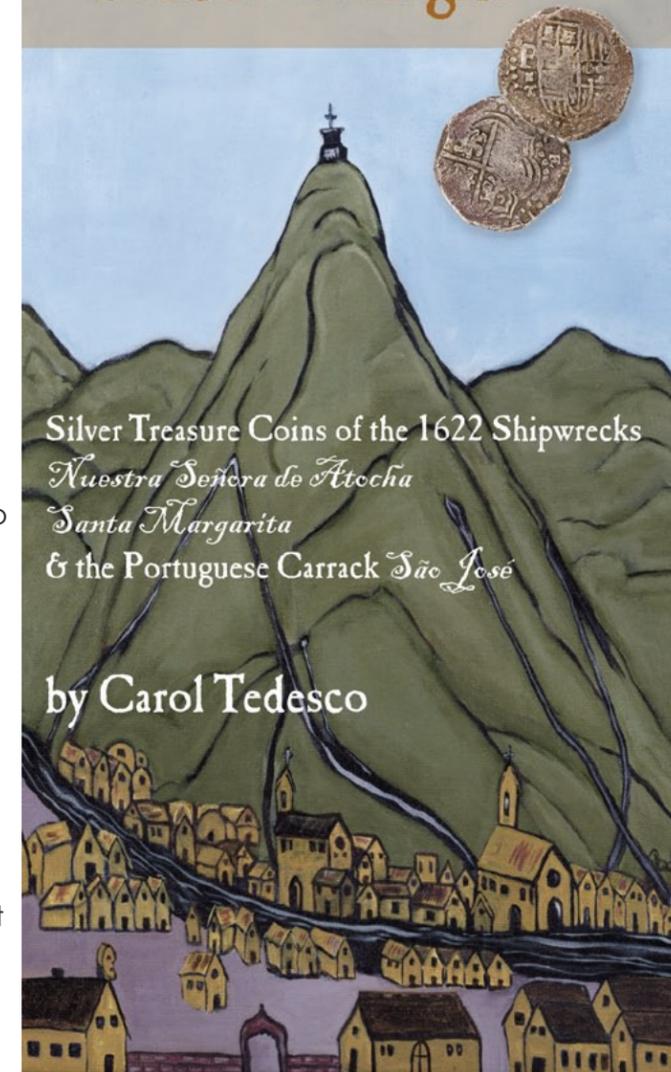
■ **Full story**

First HMS Victory to be raised—after 300 years

This is another treasure wreck that was discovered by Odyssey Marine Exploration four years ago. The vessel, predecessor of Nelson's famous flagship, which some believe was carrying £500m of gold coins, went down in a storm off the Channel Islands in 1744, tak-

ing more than 1,000 sailors to their deaths. According to the *Sunday Times*, the wreck is to be handed over to the Maritime Heritage Foundation, which is expected to employ Odyssey Marine Exploration to carry out the recovery. ■

Pieces of Eight



Silver Treasure Coins of the 1622 Shipwrecks
Nuestra Señora de Atucha
Santa Margarita
& the Portuguese Carrack *São José*

by Carol Tedesco

Fully illustrated with hundreds of finely detailed photographs, *Pieces of Eight* is more than just a reference book. Carol Tedesco not only explains the subtle nuances of the coins themselves, but places them in the context of their moment in history, explaining where they were coming from, where they were going and why.

To be released in 2010 by
SeaStory Press, Key West Florida.
To be on our availability e-mail alert list,
please inquire at lostgalleons@aol.com.