

TALES FROM PNG :: DON SILCOCK

Kimbe Bay's Zero Wreck

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.



Zero Wreck

SO, when local villager William Nui saw the plane laying on the sandy sea floor, he thought he had found the wreckage of the recent crash - not that of a WWII Japanese fighter that had remained undisturbed for almost 60 years!

That the wreck was actually found is an interesting story in itself, because William was free diving for sea cucumbers at the time when he noticed what appeared to be a large shadow on the sea bed.

Like many people in 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 and realized that it was the wreck of a plane rather than some demon of the deep.

William reported the discovery to the local authorities and word of the discovery made it to Max Benjamin, the owner of Walindi Plantation Dive Resort. Max 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 USA, a remarkable fighting machine.

It achieved legendary status initially because of its role during the infamous Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. 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 3000 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 declining manufacturing capability of Japan compared to the overwhelming capacity so rapidly developed by the USA.

Initially the Kamikaze attacks were ad-hoc in nature whereby when Japanese planes were hit during battle, their pilots would deliberately crash into Allied ships in a last, desperate attempt to inflict as much damage as possible.

But in October 1944 the Japanese Naval Air Force deployed specially modified Zeros in the battle for Leyte and by the end of WWII a total of 49 Allied ships had been sunk by Kamikaze attacks.

The History of the Kimbe Bay Zero

When Max Benjamin first dived the Zero, he found it in quite remarkable condition, considering 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. Plus, the throttle lever was in the "Off" position and the pitch control set to reduce air speed - which all indicated pointed to a controlled landing.

The probability being that the pilot had got lost and ran out of fuel. A relatively common occurrence as WWII progressed, with Japanese records showing that in 1942 only 10 Zero pilots had been shot down in air combat, while 16 had disappeared due to 'unknown causes'.

Max and his wife Cecilie are very knowledgeable about the history of WWII in PNG. Both were fascinated by the newly found wreck in their backyard... so they tried to piece together



Zero Wreck



Zero Wreck



Map above shows where 'ZERO' is. Right - Kamikaze Attack and Kamikaze Pilots



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 USAAF 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 US 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.

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 show that the plane went missing during the battle of Cape Gloucester in 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, but 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 perfect, 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 Kimbe Bay Zero

The Zero wreck is located towards the northern end of the Willaumez Peninsular, which affords much of Kimbe Bay it's 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 you need several dry days to see it at its best, 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 wingspan 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's Febrina and Oceania also visit the wreck from time to time.



Walindi day boat anchored at the Zero wreck

:: DON SILCOCK

Don is based from Bali and his website

<https://indopacificimages.com/> has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and "big animal" encounters globally.