

# Wreck heaven

PICTURES: DON SILCOCK

**PNG is a treasure trove of war wrecks. Underwater photographer and diving writer Don Silcock explores four famous planes that lie at the bottom of the sea.**

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War, of course, is deadly but for aircraft pilots and crew the rate of attrition was particularly high. Many were shot out of the sky, others suffered mechanical failures, while others got lost and ran out of fuel.  
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**W**orld War 2 came to Papua New Guinea in January 1942, when the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Rabaul in New Britain, turning the region into a major theatre of war in the battle for the Pacific.

There were many brutal encounters between the Japanese and the defending Allied forces. Conditions were often

appalling, and the fighting was incredibly fierce with many young lives lost on both sides.

World War 2 was the first time that air power played a major role in combat, and both sides had formidable aircraft in action.

War, of course, is deadly but for aircraft pilots and crew the rate of attrition was particularly high. Many were shot out of the

sky, others suffered mechanical failures, while others just got lost and simply ran out of fuel.

Most of those planes have never been found because they came down in remote jungle locations or far out at sea.

But some have and the story of the underwater wrecks offers a unique insight into a time long gone. ➤





BLACK JACK,  
MILNE BAY



Lying in deep water, just off the fringing reef from Boga Boga village on the tip of Cape Vogel, is what many consider to be the best aircraft wreck in PNG.

The wreck is the B-17F 'Black Jack' Flying Fortress, which takes its name from the last two digits of its serial number 41-24521 (21 is a blackjack hand in the card game of pontoon).

Black Jack's final flight was on July 10, 1943, when it left 7-Mile Aerodrome in Port Moresby on a mission to bomb the Japanese airfields at Rabaul in New Britain.

The flight was troubled soon after take-off, with two of the four engines developing problems, however pilot Ralph De Loach and his crew of nine managed to reach Rabaul and drop their bombs.

On the return journey Black Jack ran into a violent storm on approach to the coast, a situation De Loach later described as "the blackest of black nights ... the worst flying weather I'd ever seen in my life."

Low on fuel and with two malfunctioning engines, De Loach decided to head south-east towards Milne Bay, but was forced to ditch the plane at Boga Boga.



The crew survived the landing and scrambled out of Black Jack before it sank down to the sandy seabed 50 metres below – where it lay for another 43 years.

The discovery of Black Jack reads like an adventure novel, with three Australians – Rod Pierce, Bruce Johnson and David Pennefather – stumbling on the wreck almost by accident

in late December 1986, while searching for a another wreck.

The villagers had told Pennefather about a plane crashing near their reef during the war and he believed it might be the Australian Beaufort A9, which had crash-landed off Cape Vogel in November 1942.

Pierce, Johnson and Pennefather organised an exploration trip on Pierce's liveaboard dive-boat MV *Barbarian* to search for the wreck.

Pearce found Black Jack as he made his way along the edge of the fringing reef at Boga Boga and, for someone who had dedicated his life to wreck diving, it was like finding the Holy Grail.

Over the next few days they dived the wreck as much as its depth of 50 metres would allow, entering the inside of the plane and finding the radio call plate and 24521 serial number, which allowed them to identify it.

Diving the wreck is a unique experience. The plane is so intact that it is almost like a set from a Hollywood movie. The nose is badly crumpled from the impact of the landing and the propellers on the four engines are twisted, but the rest of the plane is in remarkable condition after more than 70 years under water. ➤



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# ZERO, KIMBE BAY



Local villager William Nui found the wreck of the Zero in January 2000, not long after a small plane had crashed on take-off from Hoskins Airport in Kimbe Bay. So, when he saw a plane lying on the sandy sea floor, he thought he had found the wreckage of the recent crash – not that of a World War 2 Japanese fighter plane that had remained undisturbed for nearly 60 years.

Nui took his story to the local authorities and word of the discovery made it to Max Benjamin at Walindi Plantation Dive Resort, who doubted the veracity but felt that it should be checked out.

What Benjamin found was a World War 2 Mitsubishi Zero in good condition with no signs of bullet holes or combat damage to indicate it had been shot down. Rather the 'off' position on the throttle lever and the pitch control set to reduce air speed clearly pointed to a controlled crash landing.








The aircraft's serial number and date are still visible on the wreck, and military records show that the plane went missing during the battle of Cape Gloucester on December 27, 1943.

The pilot on that day was Tomiharu Honda and local legend is that he was helped ashore by nearby villagers and guided back to Japanese-held territory. ➤

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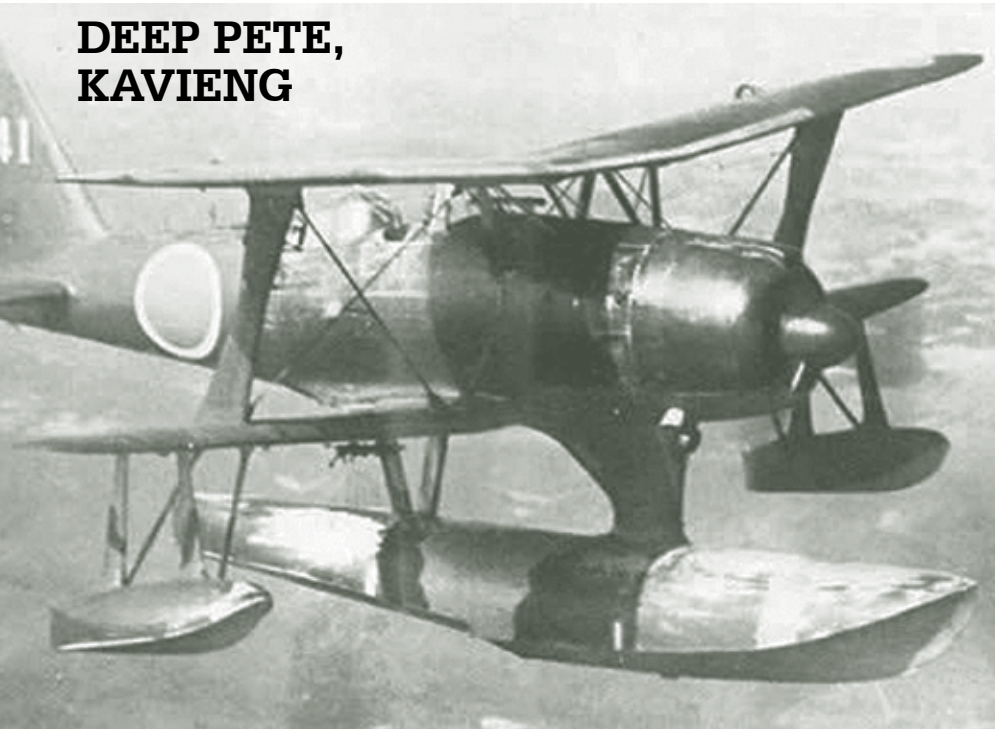
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DEEP PETE,  
KAVIENG



While Rabaul was Japan's main regional base, Kavieng in nearby New Ireland also played a significant role and the original Australian-built airfield was expanded and a sea-plane base established.

Both became important targets for the Allied forces when the tide of war turned; as a result, there are more known aircraft wrecks around Kavieng than anywhere else in PNG. My personal favourite is Deep Pete.

The plane is a Mitsubishi F1M floatplane, which was designed and built to be launched by catapult from battleships, cruisers and aircraft tenders and used for reconnaissance missions.

The F1M was a biplane, with a single large central float and stabilising floats at each end of the lower wing. Early versions suffered from poor directional stability in flight, and were prone to 'porpoise' when on the water – which may explain why the wreck is actually there.

The name 'Pete' comes from the way the Allied Forces identified enemy aircraft during

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the war as the Japanese naming convention was difficult to understand and pronounce. So, the Allies used code names instead, with men's names given to fighter aircraft, women's names to bombers and transport planes, bird names to gliders and tree names to trainer aircraft.

The wreck of the Pete floatplane is on the western side of Nusa Lik (small Nusa) Island which, along with Big Nusa Island, provides the shelter for Kavieng's harbour.

The wreck lies on its back, with the remains of its main float sticking up, on flat, white sand in 40 metres of water – hence the name 'Deep Pete'. As it is on the Pacific Ocean side of Kavieng, diving it on an incoming tide means that the visibility is often exceptional and usually in excess of 30 metres.

Although its tail is broken, its biplane shape is intact given the relatively lightweight and fragile nature of the aircraft. What makes the

Deep Pete so photogenic is the resident school of yellow sweetlips that stream in and around the wings, plus the batfish and barracuda that patrol in the clear blue waters above the wreck.

At just 9.4 metres long and with a wingspan of 10.9 metres, Deep Pete is not a big wreck but because of its depth and the square profile of the dive, there is rarely enough time to fully explore it. ➤

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CATALINA, KAVIENG

The wreck of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) PBY Catalina A24-11 lies in 20 metres of water near the entrance to Kavieng's harbour. The Catalina flying boat was developed by the US Navy in the 1930s as a long-range patrol

bomber and, although slow and somewhat ungainly, served with distinction in the role it was designed for, as well as providing a very effective way of rescuing downed airmen. Its ability to land on water meant that it

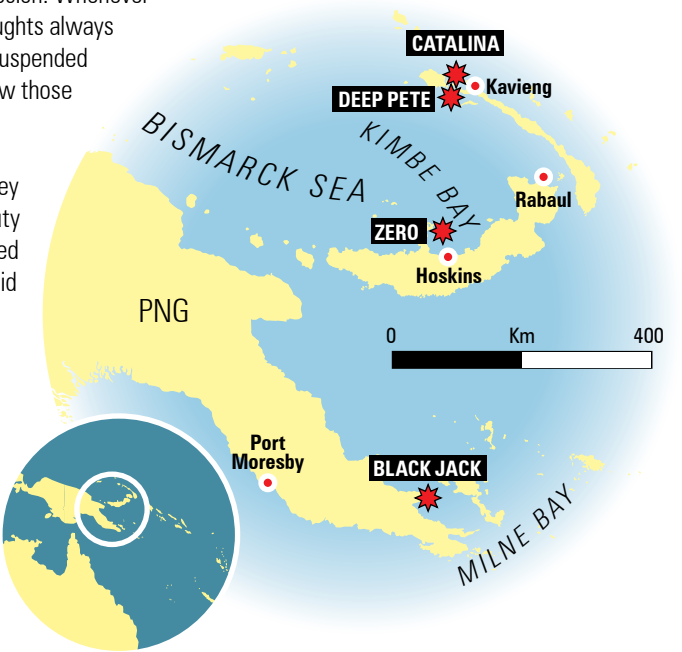
could be used to quickly and effectively rescue crews that had gone down in the Pacific and it is credited with saving the lives of many Allied aircrews. PBY A24-11 had taken off from Rabaul with six other RAAF Catalinas on a mission to attack the Japanese base at Truk Lagoon and had landed

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at Kavieng to refuel before heading north into the Pacific. After refuelling at Nusa Island, the Catalinas took off again one by one, but disaster struck A24-11 when one of its wing bombs exploded during take-off. The force of the explosion killed the crew instantly and sent what was left of the Catalina to the bottom of the harbour entrance, where it lay until 2000 when Rod Pierce found the wreckage. The engines are what make the Catalina wreck special, as they stand proud on the

seabed, surrounded by those parts of the plane not obliterated in the explosion. Whenever I dive the Catalina my thoughts always return to the brave crew suspended in the flimsy fuselage below those massive engines. Like all the crews of the aircraft wrecks of PNG, they were simply doing their duty for their country. Some lived to tell the tale, but many did not and those wrecks are poignant reminders of the sacrifices they made. ■ **Bali-based Don Silcock photographs and writes about the diving in the Indo-Pacific region. His work can be found at [indopacificimages.com](http://indopacificimages.com).**



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