

South Pacific Diver I Stop Long Hop

by Robert Scott

MANUS ISLAND

Manus Island lies 400 air miles north-west of Rabaul in the Admiralty Islands group. Renowned for its past history during the Second World War as one of the largest Naval Bases for the great American Fleet, it is now administrated by the Australian Government with the Royal Australian Navy still maintaining a Naval Base on the isle of Lombrum. This is no reflection on the once active harbour which sheltered over 900 capital ships awaiting the final thrust at Japan.

Stores, men and equipment literally covered the islands, while bombers and fighters stood by on some of the biggest airstrips in the Pacific area. The remains of some of these could be seen as the DC3 set its final approach course for the landing strip at Momote. After a smooth touch-down, I alighted from the aircraft and was met by a native driver-boy who showed no end of astonishment at my "bikpela" speargun and "bikpela wind" lung bottles being unloaded from the aircraft. As the Manus Islanders are very keen spearfishermen themselves, it didn't take long for the word to be passed around and soon I was surrounded by boys all talking excitedly and shyly touching my equipment.

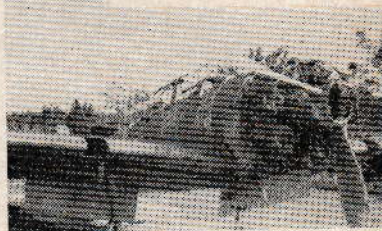
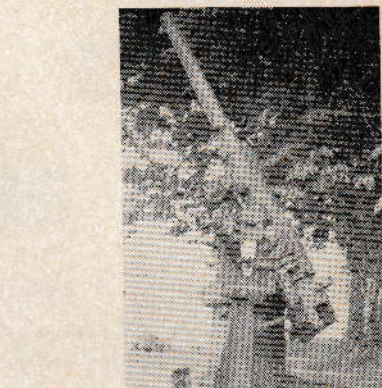
With so much help around we soon loaded the Landrover and were bumping along the wartime coral road that would take us to Lorengau, the only township, some 17 miles distant. After half an hour of a very scenic drive we approached the Loniu Passage bridge which connects the Isles of the Los Negros to Lorengau. It was here where I was to carry out an underwater survey of bridge piles which had recently been damaged.

As we slowly drove across it the driver-boy told me of a 14-foot sea-going crocodile which had been sighted there trying to climb the bank. I casually asked him how long ago this was and was more than relieved to find out it had been three years back. All the same, I still gave a shudder as I looked down into the black, muddy water.

Finally we reached Lorengau and it was here that I met two old buddies from Rabaul Underwater Club, Roger Medland and Andy Sproul, who were working up here on a government contract. We immediately got together and made some arrangements to go out for a quick dip after work and Andy promised a place where there were plenty of fish and maybe a few sharks. I had heard rumours of the viciousness of Manus sharks, but when I tried to question Roger on them, I was told with a grin, "You'll find out."

Finally, we hit the water a little after 4.00 p.m. and swam out a narrow gutter to the deeper water. Here the bottom shelved away into small gutters and broken coral bombies before leading over the drop-off. Straight away, a small bronze whaler swam in out of the deep for a close look before moving out again to take up station for the next 40 minutes. There were plenty of fish about, and soon I speared a nice Sweetlip. Immediately two 7-foot reef sharks swam in and tried to take one of them off the spear. I looked out into the deeper water expecting to see something larger move in, but all was quiet.

I remembered what Andy had told me previously about a native boy who had speared a fish and whilst trying to get it off his spear, a 10-foot Tiger Shark had attacked him. It had worked itself up into a frenzy when the boy panicked and came in close before rolling over on its back, but shied off at the last second when



Andy appeared. The boy soon calmed down and so did the shark, which moved out into deeper water and disappeared.

These thoughts raced through my head and I noticed Andy and Roger moving in closer to me, not like the old days back in Rabaul, when we used to jump in the water and move off in different directions and "watch out" if you swam into each other's territory. The reef sharks had quietened down now that the fish had died, so I tied it to the float before moving on.

Soon I came across a large clam firmly embedded in the bottom. It was three feet long and about two feet wide with the mantle extended, this was the first large live clam which I had seen.



● *Andy Sproule (and his Barracuda).*

After a few more fish had been speared, we headed back to shore as it was getting dark. After 6 o'clock we noticed that the reef was just starting to come to life with the larger fish moving up into the shallows, so we decided to stay a little longer working the gutters, but soon it became too cold and we had to leave.



● *Michael with a Manus Island Hump-head Wrasse.*

That night we played a tape that I had received from the South Pacific Divers Club, and it was fun to listen to the old mob and think of them down there in the cold water, all dressed up in their full length rubber suits, while we were sweating it out over cold beers.

The following day I carried out the bridge survey amongst a bottom covered with cannon shells and old wartime equipment. After the job was done, I moved on up the passage to take some photos of a landing craft graveyard that I had been told about. It was here that I saw literally hundreds of American L.C.T. that had been driven ashore and abandoned, some had been scuttled in mid-stream and still contained weapons and ammunition. What a place! Even to think of all those brass propellers (two to each craft) and some of those diesel engines which are still in reasonable condition.

While diving in these black, muddy waters, I found a Japanese landing craft that had been hit amidsthips with a small calibre shell, the way the metal had been peeled back was a sight to wonder at. It reminded me of the L.C.T.s that we had seen in a Japanese tunnel back in Rabaul which had been strafed with cannon shell.

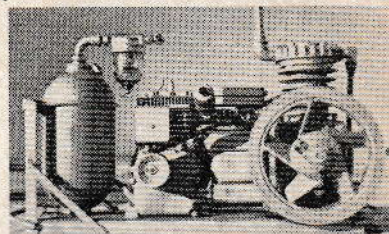
All too soon time had run out on my short stay at Manus and it was soon time to pack up, but here's hoping I can again return some day.

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