



The Battle of Cape Gloucester

The years 1943 and 1944 were a period of high tension between the Japanese and the Allied forces

Text & images by Christopher Bartlett

Papua New Guinea is well known for being home to some of the best reef diving in the world thanks to the abundance of top-drawer dive sites and the dearth of divers visiting them, but not many know about the rich history that lies beneath.

During World War II, the Imperial Japanese forces were determined to take the airport at Port Moresby as a platform to isolate and possibly invade

Australia, but the Allies were determined to stop them. Early in the proceedings, the northern port of Rabaul, the eastern end of New Britain, fell and became the main Imperial base in the South Pacific Rim. In order to protect ships coming from the Pacific, a rear supply base with multipurpose single-engine seaplanes was set up towards the northeast.

Cape Gloucester, the western end of New Britain, was the scene of a major Allied offensive in late 1943 to early 1944, and battles raged at several points on the main Island of New Guinea itself in Oro and Milne Bay provinces. The result is a historical diver's treasure chest of aviation and naval vessels.

In 1944, Kavieng, the western tip of New Ireland, was an important supply base for the Japanese military. On February 15, 1944, the US launched an attack, resulting in major damage to installations, including sinking numerous seaplanes anchored in the

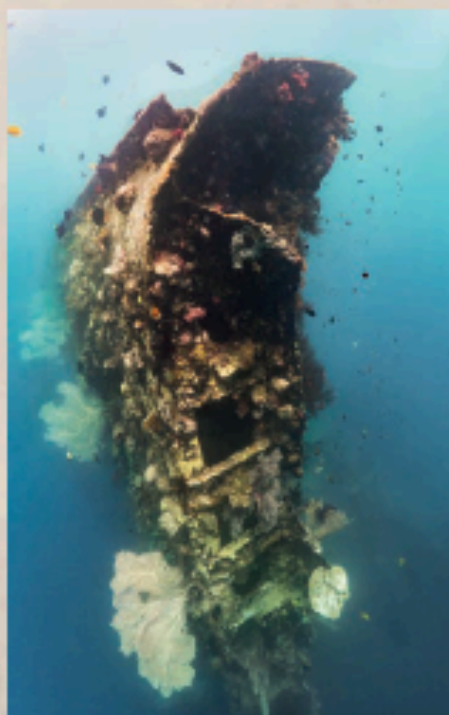
harbour. The American Air Force also suffered losses with four B25s of the 345th Bomb Group going down. Three remain undiscovered, but *Stubborn Hellion* sits in 12 metres of water in the mangroves close to Albatross Passage.



By the harbour, one can find a Pete biplane, three Jakes, an Allied PBV-5, also known as the Catalina flying boat, and the remains of the *Terryu Maru*. The metal-skinned Japanese planes are still in excellent condition, whilst only the engine blocks, props, gear, and wing frames remain of the Catalina. One can also find an assortment of munitions and even a 500lb bomb strewn across the sand nearby.

The *Sanko Maru* was an armed freighter known as a 'hell ship' used by the Japanese to transport prisoners of war

Five minutes' boat ride away, behind Nusa Lik Island, is the magnificent Deep Pete. Upside down in 38 metres of beautiful blue water, it rests in the sand; a haven for schools of goatfish and snapper. Sometimes, there are so many fish swarming around that one can barely see the propeller.



The day after the four B25s were lost over Kavleng, the 345th Bomb Group found some Japanese ships by Three Island Harbour, Tunnung Island, off the north coast of New Hanover.

The *Sanko Maru* was an armed freighter known as a "hell ship" used by the Japanese to transport prisoners of war in the Philippines under appalling conditions. It was also the mother ship to two midget submarines, escorted by *Subchaser* CH39. At over 130 metres long, the *Sanko Maru* was an easy target and took many hits from 500lb bombs. Amidst the attack, the *Subchaser* attempted to flee, but instead, it ran aground on a shallow reef one kilometre away and became target practice for the bombers and machine gunners.

The *Sanko Maru* is probably the most beautifully overgrown shipwreck in the Pacific. It is festooned with fans and sea whips, glittering with fish, and lying on her side in 22 metres of water with the port side a mere five metres deep.

Fifty metres off to the side, one of the midget submarines sits, hidden from the salvagers who took the props and boilers from the *Sanko Maru*. Interestingly, she is one of the 76 midget submarines built between 1934 and 1944. She sits with her conning tower open and whip corals growing off her empty twin torpedo tubes and twin props.

OPPOSITE PAGE
The wreck of the Deep Pete, found off Uissanung Island, Kavleng

ABOVE The *Subchaser* CH39, located off New Hanover

BOTTOM LEFT
The *Sanko Maru*, located off New Hanover

The township of Rabaul, being a major base for the Japanese, has numerous wrecks from Allied attacks. Sadly, extensive salvage has been carried out on many of them, and the major volcanic eruption in 1994 that coated parts of Rabaul in six metres of ash, have covered many of them up.

However, a 90-minute ride down the coast sits a Pete biplane in superb condition, 26 metres deep, in clear blue water. This Pete was shot down at anchor by the submarine base, next to George's wreck, a cable layer converted to a mine layer. The ship is unidentified, but named after the diver who found her. Her bow is at 14 metres, her stern at 60 metres, and it is possible to penetrate the hold and the bridge. There is also the Mitsubishi Zero close to shore near Kokopo town.

Papua New Guinea has a great diversity of known and diveable plane wrecks, with more yet to be discovered, and a number of interesting wartime shipwrecks, too. ▣