

Mitsubishi A6M Zero

by Chris Hamilton

On Boxing Day in 1943 a lone Japanese pilot in a Mitsubishi A6M Zero made an emergency landing off the jungles of Papua New Guinea that almost 70 later has become one of the most unspoiled and intact aviation wrecks in Asia Pacific.

The fate of pilot Tomiharu Honda has never been determined. He may have lived to old age as an adopted villager, or wasted away in wretched solitude and starvation in the mountains. He may have met his end as a ceremonial feast for a head hunting tribe. All that can be known with certainty is that he never again saw Japan, and the craft he left behind has become one of the best-preserved and most fascinating wrecks to dive in Asia Pacific. The rusted old Zero body is also a testament to his aeronautic skills; few pilots could have made an emergency landing that resulted in so little damage to the plane. It seems most likely that the crash was due to fuel shortage. Honda must have expertly skimmed the plane over the surface of the water until it glided to a stop about 50 meters from shore. As the plane gurgled down to the shallow muck, one wanders what was going through his head as

he scrambled out of the cockpit and headed for the jungle shoreline.

68 years later, the body of the plane still rests in fifteen meters of water, solid and unbroken, the propellers still straight and intact, even with some guns in place. Descending from the surface it is not difficult for divers to imagine what she must have looked like on that morning in 1943.

The Mitsubishi A6M Zero is accessible to divers today from Walindi Plantation Resort in Kimbe Bay, New Britain by day charter or live aboard. It was through the resort that the wreck first became accessible,

(Top) After almost 70 years in the mud, the plane is still in remarkable shape. – Nikon D200, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm Manual exposure, One ikelite ds125 one 1 ds160- F8, 1/100 iso 200 strobes off.

(Right) A diver hovers over the cockpit. – Nikon D200, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm Manual exposure, One ikelite ds125 one 1 ds160- F8, 1/60 iso 200





after local sea cucumber divers stumbled upon it in 2000. Completely covered in decades of sponges and corals and sediment, the odd-shaped bulge was barely distinguishable from a nearby coral bommie. When it had been determined that the odd shaped bulge was certainly a wreck, it was meticulously scoured by avid divers from the local resort. After brushing off the excess growth, enthusiasts were flabbergasted to find the complete unbroken plane body before them. Since that time, divers and photographer from all over the world have come to inspect this relic of what was once considered cutting edge technology, a Japanese creation

that was thought be able to shift the balance of power during the war.

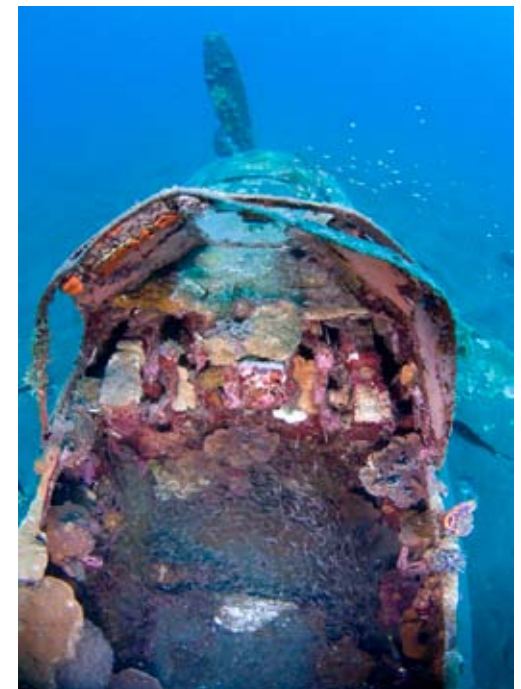
The dive is suitable for all experience levels. As she sits so near the shore visibility can vary, but the 9.9 meter craft (with a 12 meter wingspan) is usually entirely visible for photo opportunities even on murkier days. Marine life hovers about the wreck, taking refuge in every concave and crevice; pipefish glide over the body and schools of juvenile cardinalfish dart to and fro. Behind the pilot seat in the cockpit a large anemone houses a family of pink anemonefish. The nearby bommie is also a haven for marine life and fascinating for divers to observe,



(Left) A model of a Japanese Mitsubishi A6M Zero given to the owner of Walindi Resort by a Japanese amateur historian.

(Above) View from above of the wreck. – Nikon D200, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm Manual exposure, One ikelite ds125 one 1 ds160- F8, 1/100 iso 320 strobes off.

(Right) The cockpit is shrouded in glassfish. . – Nikon D200, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm Manual exposure, One ikelite ds125 one 1 ds160- F8, 1/80, iso 200





(Above) A diver sits where Tomiharu Honda once did. – Nikon D200, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm Manual exposure, One ikelite ds125 one 1 ds160- F8, 1/80 iso 200 strobes off.



(Left) Diver inspects the nose of the Zero. – Nikon D200, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm Manual exposure, One ikelite ds125 one 1 ds160- F8, 1/80, iso 200



Being shallow, the wreck affords long bottom times and every inch can be inspected by divers. – Nikon D200, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm Manual exposure, One ikelite ds125 one 1 ds160- F8, 1/80 iso 200 strobes off.

harboring glassfish schools, mantis shrimp, nudibranchs, gobies and all kinds of other critters – one dive in Kimbe Bay is rarely enough for the enthusiast. The diving is conveniently located, the conditions are excellent, the marine life diverse, and amongst it all, one of the most mysterious and well preserved wrecks from WWII. To experience a piece of history, Kimbe Bay and the Mitsubishi A6M Zero is a must do for any diver heading to Papua New Guinea.

For more information visit www.Walindi.com

**Photographs by
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Text by Leah Sindel &
Christopher Hamilton**

www.chphotographic.com

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