

The WAU FACTOR
Adventure tourism in Papua New Guinea
by Elizabeth Thurston

I had left Sydney at 7.30 am on a cold morning in July on a flight packed with shivering pilgrims returning to Papua New Guinea from World Youth Day. Many had come from New Britain where I grew up and we were soon chatting like *wantoks*. But I was setting off on my own pilgrimage and, instead of a Bible, I was carrying my father's war diary – destination Wau in Morobe Province.

Now as I buckled my seatbelt on AirNiugini flight 108 from Port Moresby to Lae, a local business man sitting next to me voiced surprise that we were on time. "You're lucky – it's known as the 'one o late'!" It seemed we had no sooner reached cruising altitude when our plane banked to port, and the sharp outline of the Salamaua peninsula came suddenly into view. The swirling clouds usually so impenetrable parted to show the green peaks of mountain ranges stretching as far as the eye could see. Far below, the Markham River wound through the valley folds like a giant python. I tried to imagine Nadzab airstrip rushing up to meet us, as it must have been 65 years ago – swarming with khaki military personnel and reverberating with the sounds of Dakotas, Liberators and Fortresses.

In January 1943 United States Air Force B-17 E Flying Fortress 41-9234 – otherwise known as "the ghost of Black Cat Pass" - had been skilfully crash landed by pilot Lieutenant Ray Dau just out of Wau. It had been hit first by anti-aircraft fire while bombing Lae harbour and then suffered a relentless barrage from the Japanese Zeros. But in Ray Dau, the United States had an extraordinary pilot and the story of the ill-fated Fortress is one that involved my father. I had come to see it for myself.

Tim Vincent, from Wau Adventures, was easy to spot as I entered the terminal and with him was Phillip Bradley, author of the critically acclaimed *Battle for Wau* (Cambridge University Press). We had a three-hour drive ahead of us and as we crossed the Markham Bridge the light was already fading. By Zenag it had gone. We wound



higher and
higher up
through the
Bulolo gorge

The Edie Creek road near Wau, Papua New Guinea, Tuesday, July 29, 2008. Edie Creek and the Bulolo River experienced gold rushes in the 1920s. Gold is still being mined there today. Photo: Elizabeth Thurston

and around the mountains – the only sound was the rushing torrent of the Bulolo River to our right.

July is the wet season and heavy downpours had turned the unsealed road to Wau into a quagmire of lakes and craters. I clung to the back of Tim's seat as we rattled and splashed and Tim would occasionally stop to wipe the mud off the headlights. This was definitely adventure tourism!

Wau Adventures is run by Tim and Danielle Vincent. Danielle has spent her life in PNG and Tim is an ex Australian army officer, who fits the country perfectly. They are passionate about the Wau-Bulolo Valley and its tourism potential – especially for trekkers looking beyond the Kokoda experience.

Morobe Province has a colourful history from the time of the first gold rushes at Edie Creek near Wau in the 1920s. Come the war and the region was the scene of a different activity. Phillip Bradley's book gives a fascinating account of the heroic battle for Wau. Played out in a landscape of dramatic mountains, misty valleys, and the baking kunai grass of the lower slopes, a small band of Australian soldiers, led by Captain Sherlock, from Kanga Force, held grimly on to Wau defending its airstrip against vast numbers of Japanese until vital reinforcements could be landed.



Phillip Bradley, author of *The Battle for Wau*, left and Tim Vincent from Wau Adventures, Wau, Papua New Guinea, Tuesday, July 29, 2008. Across the Wau Valley is Wandumi Ridge, the scene of Captain Wilfrid Sherlock's heroic stand against the Japanese. Photo: Elizabeth Thurston

I unpacked my father's war diary and over dinner and a glass of wine we looked at the entries for January 1943. Ted Fulton had been gold prospecting in the Sepik before war was declared. In 1939 he joined the A.I.F. and served in the

Middle East and Greek Campaigns. When the Sixth Division was sent to New Guinea he was posted behind enemy lines with ANGAU to collect intelligence and to persuade the local people to side with the Australians. He had just spent days walking the precipitous Bulldog Track and was in Wau organizing supplies to continue on to the Sepik when around midday on 8 January he saw the B-17 “coming slowly up the valley at 2,000 feet”. The crew were throwing out ammunition and equipment as the plane, losing height, disappeared into the mountains in the vicinity of Kaisenik.

Rescue parties were sent out from Wau and Corporal John Smith, together with the people from the village of Kaisenik, was first to the crash site. The Americans’ relief was immense because they thought they had ditched in enemy territory. Sadly, the tail-gunner, Sergeant Henry Bowen, died on the mountain. My father, who had also been sent to locate the survivors with flasks of hot coffee, helped bring the injured party back to Wau. He writes...

“Some of the carriers were scared of being in the dark with a body. I reassured them and pushed onto the swing bridge where I found Corporal Mills with the injured [airman] on a stretcher. Crossing the narrow swaying bridge in the dark was extremely difficult. I went ahead with the torch while two natives held the wires apart to stop the bridge swinging too much...Progress in the dark was very slow and required extreme caution as slipping off the narrow path would have had fatal results...the going was very bad but the carriers did an excellent job with the stretchers; there was a minimum of shaking despite the fact they had to feel their foothold all the way...Our rescue mission had brought back one dead, four stretcher cases and four walking wounded.” The injured airmen were flown to Port Moresby on 10th January by the Australian RAAF pilot, Flight Lieutenant “Arch” Dunne and the B-17 remains exactly where it came down 65 years ago.

Early next day we drove to the spot where we would begin the trek. It is impossible not to surrender to the mood and beauty of the mountains that circle Wau. Emerald green and blue ridges melt into the sky and a cool silver mist rises through the pine trees in the morning. Cascading streams and wild orchids complete the canvas.



Early morning mist on the road to Kaisenik near Wau, Papua New Guinea, July 30, 2008. In the wet season the unsealed roads are passable only by four-wheel drive vehicles.

Photo: Elizabeth Thurston

We stopped first at the village of Kaisenik because I wished to meet the people whose fathers had tenderly carried the stretchers alongside Ted. I showed them his photo taken during the war and this caused much interest as we compared stories of that fateful night. I stood on the swing bridge and looked toward the mountains.



Tim had supplied me with a backpack, water bottle and walking stick and Abraham, from Kaisenik, went ahead with the machete, cutting steps into the slippery mud to

The author and Phillip Bradley with villagers from Kaisenik near Wau, Papua New Guinea, Wednesday, July 30, 2008. The grandfathers of these children helped with the rescue of the US airmen alongside my father, Ted Fulton, on the 8th of January, 1943. (Photo: Tim Vincent)

help me as we climbed ridge after ridge up and down through kunai grass, rainforest and jungle. "How" - I wondered aloud - "Did they ever carry those stretchers through this country in the pitch black?" The sense of anticipation was palpable. We crested the last ridge and there it was - on a sloping bank at the head of Black Cat pass, the B-17 lying like an enormous broken bird.

Abraham from Kaisenik village and the USAAF B-17E Flying Fortress, near Wau, Papua New Guinea, Wednesday, July 30, 2008.

Abraham's grandfather was one of the first to reach the crash site of the ill-fated Fortress.

Photo:
Elizabeth Thurston





The USAAF B-17E Flying Fortress, near Wau, July 2008. Tim Vincent and Phillip Bradley sit on the wing of the Fortress, Wednesday, July 30, 2008. Pilot Lt Ray Dau flew the crippled Fortress over the tree tops of the valley before crash-landing into the hill. Photo: Elizabeth Thurston

United in the silence of the landscape, we sat on the giant wing and looked down the valley mentally retracing the flight path over the tree-tops. With profound skill and a miracle, Ray Dau and his co-pilot Donald Hoggan had brought the crippled fortress to where it now lies. The two starboard engines were knocked out and Dau was unable to gain altitude. He says, "I knew it was just a matter of time, so I began to look for a soft place to set her down. We glided in on the side of a mountain at about 110 miles an hour and, as luck would have it there were no trees...so we slid along into a crash landing."* We marveled at his cool-headed courage and the sacrifice of tail gunner, Henry Bowen, who lost his life fighting till the bitter end. Lieutenant Albert 'Bud' Cole was hit by shrapnel many times and Robert Albright died in hospital six days later. Every member of the crew of 41-9234 was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Purple Heart.

In my back pack I had brought my father's diary and letters from Ray Dau and Donald Hoggan, who live in Arizona and California. They are the last survivors of the crew and they have never returned to Wau.



The cockpit of the Fortress showing the seats once occupied by pilot Lt Ray Day and co-pilot Lt Donald Hoggan, near Wau, Papua New Guinea, Wednesday, July 30, 2008. Every crew member of the Fortress was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Purple Heart for bravery under duress. Photo: Elizabeth Thurston)

Ray Dau wrote to me, ‘Your father earned the respect and thanks of our B-17 crew for the rescue operation...’ Donald Hoggan wrote, “I want to express my gratitude to your Dad, not a day goes by that I don’t think about some phase of my life spent in New Guinea during the war.”

If he were alive, Ted would reply that he was only one of many who helped with the rescue that night. He had shared a moment in wartime with the village people from Kaisenik and they, with true courage and compassion, were there when Ray Dau and his men needed them most.

**Dau interview with Justin Taylan*

IF YOU GO

AirNiugini has daily flights to Port Moresby from Brisbane and Cairns and twice weekly from Sydney. There are daily flights from Port Moresby to Lae (Nadzab Airport). Tim Vincent from Wau Adventures offers primary treks – the Black Cat from Wau to Salamaua and the Bulldog between Wau and Port Moresby. “Together they present world-class, if rugged, coast to coast journeys.” He can assist DIY trekkers as well as organizing fully serviced and led treks. Other packages include battlefield walking tours, mountainous 4-wheel drive tours, the Aseki smoked bodies, limestone caves, ancient burial sites, traditional dancing and feasts, local village stays, the gold dredges and ultra-light joy flights. Accommodation is a comfortable bungalow that sleeps up to twelve. All meals and transfers arranged by Wau Adventures. Email info@wauadventures.com.pg