

# THE LAST NEW GUINEA SALVAGE PIRATE by FRITZ HERSCHIED

Review by  
Bob Halstead

**T**his amazing book is a must-read for every diver. Older divers will re-live the crazy wonderful times of their youth, before bureaucrats and lawyers made risk-taking a crime and adventures passive and supervised. Young divers will have trouble believing it all.

But here it is! Routine 300ft (90m) dives on air using primitive scuba, 150ft (45m) free ascents in dive training, power heads to blast troublesome sharks, and fortunes in copper, bronze and brass awaiting the courage and ingenuity of mostly self-taught salvage pirates whose bible was the revered 1963 US Navy Diving Manual.

In his book Fritz Herscheid, writing with a natural, lively, conversational style, describes his fascinating years of adventure in Papua New Guinea (with excursions to the Solomon Islands and Philippines). He moved to Rabaul as a young Automotive Engineer in 1967, but quickly evolved into a diver, businessman, ship's captain, explosives expert and salvager of shipwrecks, mainly from World War 2.

His research enables him to identify and tell the history of many of the wrecks familiar to tourist divers today. He then describes how and why they now exist without propellers, condensers and most of their non-ferrous fittings. He and his various rival salvagers were a band of pirates indeed, poaching from each other and all doing their best to avoid authority. At this time of course PNG was still a territory of Australia. When PNG became independent in 1975 the new Nation became concerned about the preservation of its war history, salvaging rapidly came to a halt and Fritz had to find a proper job!

Some will no doubt be mortified at the destruction caused by the salvagers but the truth is that no one in the 1960's really saw these wrecks as the historical treasures they are regarded as today. Tourist diving was virtually non-existent, and the ocean was treated as an ideal rubbish tip. The one major wreck that did escape the salvage pirates, the "S'Jacob", was bombed and damaged which is why it sank. Today the superstructure is collapsing, time working the demolition job of the salvagers. Fortunately PNG has many aircraft wrecks of no interest

to salvage pirates, some ditched in pristine condition and these, being aluminium, have survived the corrosive effects of the sea and remain wonderful historic dives.

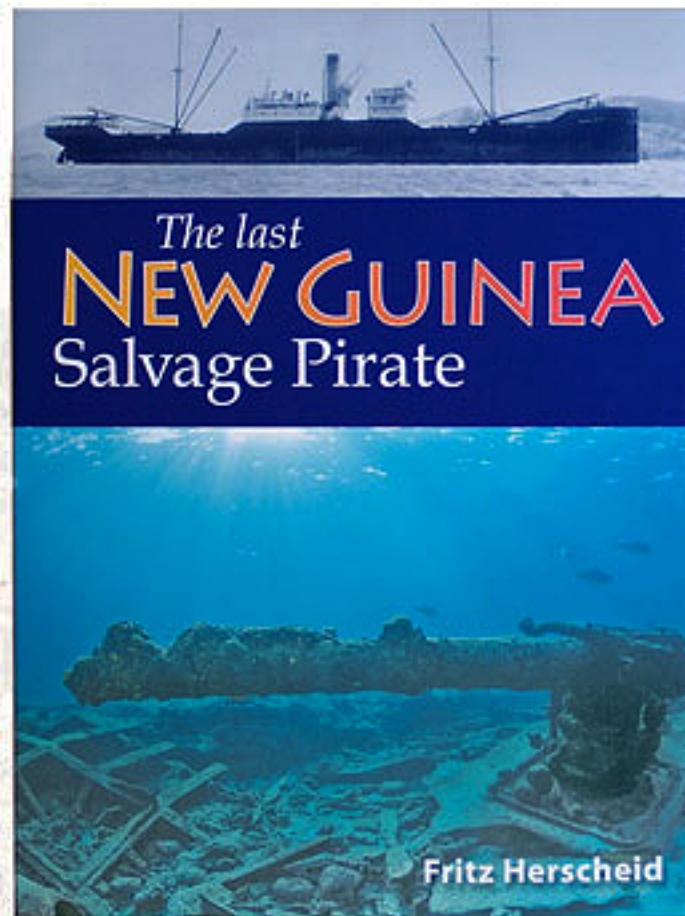
Fritz's hair-raising exploits, though high risk, resulted in few injuries and no fatalities, though he does describe fatalities of a few Rabaul divers from the same era. He confesses his own "near misses" and tells the stories with good humour and sensible caution to others. He certainly made dives outside the limits – but this was not done without precautions, such as careful monitoring of depth, bottom times and decompression stops. I have to tell you, though, that you are going to lose some sleep – but only because this book is impossible to put down. Most of the personalities he encountered are still alive and willingly contributed memories to the book.

The book has a splendid complement of photographs and maps. (I provided a few modern shots of the wrecks. BH). Original photographs of the ships, photos of the wrecks on the bottom and photos of the people and boats involved in the salvage, bring it all to life. The photos, mostly black and white and placed along with the relevant text, are well

reproduced. There is a selection of colour photographs and the whole book is printed on quality paper and well bound. At 500 pages it is a significant work – but this is a book you will treasure, and, if you are off to PNG for a dive trip, one you will refer to as it has an appendix with information on all the known diveable shipwrecks.

There is true romance, and the trials of marital stress caused by too much diving – something many divers, of both sexes, are familiar with – and a romance of a different kind that may not be so familiar – the romance of operating small ships. Fritz owned several, and loved and cared for them all, even when they tried to sink under him. This is their story too.

I finish this review with some good news (though not necessarily for Authorities) – Fritz has just purchased another boat in Cairns and is fitting it out for more adventures. I can't wait to read about them.



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Salvage Pirate  
by Fritz Herscheid  
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