In Memoriam  Bob Halstead  1944-2018

By Carl Roessler

Bob Halstead was a towering, seminal figure in the development of dive travel to Papua Niugini and the entire South Pacific. His personal achievements propelled PNG to the top rank of international diving destinations.

Born in London in 1944, he earned a degree in physics at Kings College. Bob then pursued a career in teaching, first in the Bahamas and later in Papua Niugini. While teaching in Port Moresby, Bob married Dinah, one of his diving students and also a teacher. They had a daughter they named Telita.

In those early days, little was known of the exotic diving to be discovered among PNG’s many islands. In 1977, Bob and Dinah established Tropical Diving Adventures, PNG’s first diving service. In those early years, the couple used a non-live-aboard, the Solatai, to roam the islands near Milne Bay. For overnight accommodations, they slept in friendly native villages.

Bob contacted my partner, Dewey Bergman, and me at See & Sea Travel in 1977. In 1978, I traveled to PNG, where Bob took me on a diving exploration of Wuvulu Island. While we each saw the other as a perfect future partner to develop the amazing ‘muck diving’ and rare species PNG had to offer, we could not sell the idea of sleeping in the villages to See & Sea clients because of the mosquito/malaria problem associated with being on shore overnight. Bob told me of his plans for a full-scale live-aboard which we would market together when it went into service.

In the meantime, we used a river-cruising ship, the Melanesian Explorer, along the North Coast of New Guinea, up the profoundly primitive Sepik River and out to the Trobriand Islands. The Trobriands were where Bob and I tried to coax a massive but uncooperative orca to come have its picture taken.

In 1987, Bob Halstead and Sea & Sea began a remarkable run of fully-booked cruises on the new Telita live-aboard. I was privileged to take a
dozen or more ten-day cruises with Bob over the ensuing years. Bob and Dinah lived on board the *Telita*, and Dinah prepared the meals. Clients enjoyed truly unlimited diving, as many of the best muck-diving attractions were in relatively shallow water.

Bob’s rare skill set (story teller, author, underwater photographer, Captain/navigator, Engineer/mechanic) checked every box for running dive cruises to remote parts of PNG’s primitive islands. He could fix a compressor one minute and hold a dinner audience enthralled with stories of strange fish, crocodiles and sharks the next. Best of all, Bob was a man of rare character, diligence and honesty who cared as much about passengers’ dreams being fulfilled as I did. It was a Grand Alliance, and it resulted in many divers booking two or more repeat cruises on *Telita* over the years to dive different parts of the country.

Clients on the cruises got the immediate benefit of Bob’s years of diving all through the islands. He had found dozens of strange, even bizarre, species in remote dive sites, and divers had the thrill of Bob showing them species they had never seen anywhere before.

As a personal example, Bob and I encountered one of the spectacular tartan-plaid scorpionfish *Rhinopias aphanes* on a dive one day. When *Skin Diver Magazine* later published my photo of the *Rhinopias*, it was only the third specimen of that species ever seen! That was the kind of magic diving that Bob Halstead offered. His night diving sites brought out an entire new cast of strange species, so diving days aboard *Telita* were deliciously loooong and wonderfully productive!

Bob also developed some exciting shark-feeding sites. I still have some pieces of camera gear with scars from shark teeth on them and a flooded strobe from a shark biting off the signal cord--all due to my unfortunate habit of sitting too close to the bait. Bob would grin, signal a ‘tut-tut,’ and tie down another piece of bait.

The combination of spending different seasons in different zones of PNG, the weird species found on muck dives and shark feedings drove a fabulously successful business. Over and above those powerful attractions,
Bob achieved high visibility in media. He wrote articles for a dozen dive magazines, spoke at conferences all around Asia and published eight books.

Above all, Bob Halstead was a decent, kind, courteous man. I was delighted when he found a beautiful second wife, Kirtleigh Leigh, a professional violinist who became Bob’s undersea model. Bob eventually sold Telita and the business to Mike Ball, and the early exploration phase of PNG was over.

A titan has passed. Farewell, friend and colleague…