



AKAMA REPORT 16  
25 January 2004

Our unscheduled stop at Tahuna, Indonesia marked the end of the crossing of the Celebes Sea. It was an interesting stop on a very nice island. The mountains there are high enough and the island is big enough that it generates its own microclimate. There were rain showers and partial overcast most of the time, providing a respite from the hot tropical sun.

Having made a stop, we were well rested. It's a good thing, as the first two days of the next leg, crossing the Molucca Sea, were only marginally better than the pounding we took on the way into Tahuna. The winds were much stronger than forecast resulting in waves that were high and confused. Adding to the confused sea state, we now had the Pacific Ocean groundswell, which are longer rolling waves, as the Molucca Sea is bounded on its east side by the western Pacific Ocean. At one point we wondered what on earth we were doing out there; it was not fun. However, on the third day, as we entered the Pacific, conditions were somewhat better, and on the fourth day the wind waves were nearly gone, leaving just the ground swell, which our stabilizer system easily coped with.

About six miles from Helen Reef, we spotted what appeared to be a destroyer, and partially over the horizon behind it, what appeared to be the rest of a small naval fleet. This was worrisome, in an area where border disputes are not uncommon. The last thing we needed was to be boarded by the Indonesian Navy. We slowly increased speed and stayed off the radio. As we closed on Helen we realized that this "navy" was just a bunch of rusty hulks. Helen Reef is low, so it does not show up well on the radar. It is not quite placed on the charts where it actually is, not at all uncommon by the way. Consequently, in the days before the dead-nuts accuracy of GPS navigation, there were many shipwrecks here.

Helen Reef is a raised limestone formation in the shape of an oval, capped with coral reef. Most of it is submerged at high tide. In the centre is a huge lagoon about 10-miles long and 3-miles wide, with minor reefs and rocks inside. There is a serpentine entrance passage in the outer reef, through which we picked our way. Fortunately for us, another boat, SAMPAGUITA, had got there a day earlier and gave us clear instructions, and a second boat, HARMONY-88, waited at the entrance so that we would not have to go in alone. The sand spit islands are populated only by wild life, such as sea birds and turtles.

As was the case with Indonesia, we had no visa for Palau. So, we hoped that it would be unoccupied or at least that we would be allowed to stay for a few days while we made the ship ready for the next leg. Palau does not have a reputation for warmth and openness; on the contrary, it is said that there is paperwork and high fees for every stop. On the other hand, we had received reports that another yacht stopped there recently and was welcomed. We need not have worried. We were welcomed to stay as long as we needed, without hassle, fees or even paperwork.

There are only three people on Helen Island, one of a few very small, nearly inconspicuous, sandy outcrops on Helen Reef. Currently, they are Benedict, Flavin & Robinson the Helen Reef National Park Rangers (they are posted for 2-months at a time). Yachts generally do not stop here and tourists don't

come there, as there are no facilities. About the only visits they receive are from occasional SCUBA divers, who arrive by boat, dive and leave. The Rangers told us that there had only been a presence on the reef for about two years. Prior to that, fishermen from other countries, mostly Indonesia and Taiwan literally raped the reef; there was nothing left. We can see that much of the coral was bombed out (it's making a good comeback), one Taiwanese trawler was found to have caught what amounted to all of the muscles on the reef (they are currently trying to restock it). Fish are now abundant.

We (including the other 4 yachts) had several pot luck meals on the island which the Park Rangers thoroughly enjoyed, as we invited them to all of them. We suspect that these three guys get very lonely.

This report comes to you from the Western Pacific (2d 0m N 134d 10m E), on a course of 108-degrees. We are two days out of Helen reef on our way to the Ninigo Islands (Admiralty Islands) of PNG, with about 6-days to go. Only HARMONY left when we did and they are about 20-miles away and in radio contact. There is nobody out here, no fishermen, no ships, nothing. More later!