



AKAMA REPORT 22

20 April 2004

Kitava Island to Woodlark Island was too far to make in one day and we sure hate to do overnights if we can avoid them, especially when the seas are a bit rough. So, we stopped at Gawa Island on the way. Gawa had little interest for us, and the anchorage is an open roadstead. We arrived late in the afternoon and left early the next morning only to turn around and return to Gawa for a lay-day and another night, due to high winds and big seas. The next day we were up very early and decided to leave again, but had to turn back again due to high winds and big seas. On the third day the winds and seas had died down a bit so we left.

About an hour out it got so bad that we decided to go back; then about half way back it let up again! So, we again set out for Woodlark. Despite taking spray over the pilothouse several times, three bell-ringers (waves that make our ship's bell clang) and one big bugger that launched all 35 tons of AKAMA into the air for a split-second and plopped her down with a thud in the next trough, we made it to Woodlark. The two cats travelling with us had similar hair-raising experiences including one of them getting pooped (a wave came in the back door and seawater went into the saloon). But, there were moments of hilarity. At one point, Louise-Ann opened the windward door and sat in the breeze, with an eye on the waves, in case a big one came along to spray her. She looked away at just the wrong time and about a bucket full of water came over the wing bridge and hit her square in the face. It looked like something out of one of those old black and white cartoons, including the expression on her face! There is a large, shallow bay (9-02 S by 152-28 E) on the west side of Woodlark Island, and we went into very shallow water (2 metres) to get some protection from a little peninsula. In so doing, we learned something about anchoring in shallow water. The rule of thumb ratio for chain rode, three to five times the distance to the bottom, does not work. The wave action and the winds bring the chain up bar-tight, putting stress on everything and everyone. We let out 100 feet of chain and were much more comfortable.

We had hoped that the western Woodlark anchorage would be just for overnight, but unfortunately, the weather forecast showed a deepening low just southeast of us. The winds and the waves did not abate; so, as it was Easter Sunday, we decided to have a communal dinner (SELKIE, MUSCAT and AKAMA). The next morning, we left, despite the winds and poked our way through an uncharted reef area, which was somewhat protected. Once we got out into the open sea on the other side the wind had backed off somewhat and the seas settled down to big, but relatively comfortable waves. We made Guasopa Harbour (9-14 S by 152-57 E) well before dark.

Guasopa Harbour is surrounded by a relatively large community of about 2000 persons in many villages. During WW-II the Japanese were here; thus the community boasts an airstrip (mostly overgrown with no scheduled flights). We had heard that some downed fighter and bomber airplanes were easily accessed; so we took a little walk through the community and asked around. Before too long, we had a local guide who took us through the jungle to the wreckage. There is quite a lot of it, mostly bits and pieces of fighters that looked like they had been stripped and the remains deposited there. There was, however, one larger aircraft. We believe it was a British or Australian bomber, as it

had concentric circles marked on it, the outer one yellow, then a blue one. Inside of that the paint had all worn off.

A series of lows situated between us and the Solomon Islands dogged us for weeks, restricting our movement to the occasional semi-good day, but mostly pinning us down for days on end. So, when we wanted to leave Guasopa Harbour for Budibudi we could not, due to the weather. We were stuck for two days. Finally, on Friday, 16 April, we took a chance and made the trip to Budibudi (9-17S x 153-40E); two other yachts and a local boat chose not to go, fearing that bad weather would pop up. But, we were lucky. The trip was great! We had only about one meter swells, winds from the starboard quarter at about 13 knots, and we caught fish, lots of them. No sooner would we get one off the line and put the lure back in the water and we would have another one. We caught and kept a rainbow runner, a mackerel tuna and a blue fin trevally. We released several others, and had uncountable strikes and fish nearly reeled in and lost. We caught and released several of one fish that we could not at first identify; we eventually found out that is called a job fish (and it is good to eat). When we got to Budibudi we felt bad that we had not kept the fish to give to the locals, as they are running short of food. We talked to SELKIE and MUSCAT, who followed us a day later, and they kept their catch to give out on arrival.

As we complete this report we are en route to the Solomon Islands. So, it is worth reflecting on the peoples that we have met in PNG. We "discovered" that PNG is made up of a huge number of quite different peoples, loosely from two major groups, Melanesians and Polynesians. Just where the Melanesians gave way to the Polynesians is difficult to say. But, if one were to take the people from the Northwest (e.g., Ninegoe Islands) and place them alongside the people from the Trobriand Islands, it would not take a scholar to see that there are distinct differences in colour, mannerisms, cultures et cetera. Although they belong to two predominant groups, there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of different tribes and languages. Most speak English and Pidgin, learned in school, but they also speak a mother language, which can be completely different between islands only thirty or forty miles apart.

As we went farther southeast, we noticed that the sound of the local language became softer, the building of dugout canoes and even the shape of the paddles changed, the skin colour lightened and the amount of spontaneous singing increased. Just to add to the puzzle, the cultural song and dance we experienced in Kitava was strongly reminiscent of those we saw in Hawaii, which is thousands of miles away. In the northwest, we saw people still using dugout ocean canoes to travel between islands, in the middle there was a definite lack of sails on the dugouts, and in the southeast sails again prevailed. Everywhere we went the shape of the carved paddles was a bit different, then when we reached Kitava we saw paddles carved from coconut palm fronds instead of wood. In the northwest the outriggers on the dugouts are placed several meters away from the canoe and the paddling is done a few strokes on each side; when we reached Kiriwina, we noticed that the outriggers were placed very close to the canoe, and there is a platform in the middle running the full length of the canoe. Amazingly, although they can only paddle on one side, they can go in any direction with ease.

The crossing from Budibudi (PNG) to Simbo, the nearest of the Solomon Islands (8-16S x 156-32E) started uneventfully, with the light air and flat seas we expected, but ended with high winds, rough water and rain, all unpredicted. What is it about these weather guessers! Anyway, it does not matter much, as we arrived safe and sound. Simbo Island is just a rest stop for us, as we have to go into Gizo and clear customs and immigration before we can legally land. It is too bad, as this is a truly beautiful spot. The bay is surrounded by hills and reefs, making it an excellent spot to get out of the elements. The people are friendly but not aggressive. From our stateroom porthole we can hear a group of them singing, so melodious.

So, here we are in the Solomon Islands, ready to start a new part of our adventure. Please write and let us know what is happening in your part of the world. We will continue to do likewise.

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