

DIVER



CUBA | SUPER SUCKERS | WES SKILES | SHE-P SISTERHOOD | BREATHTAKING WRECKS | SOCKEYE SALMON RUN

SKYWALKER

Canada's Spaceman Diver



The Navigator's Grandson

Text by Bret Gilliam

Back in the early 1970s I made my first visit to Palau and was killing time in Guam on my way back to the Virgin Islands when I bumped into an ex-Navy diver I'd done submarine diving work with in the Caribbean in 1971. I had yanked him out of a few tight spots in our diving projects and he insisted that I join him aboard a commercial freighter where he had recently signed on as one of the Merchant Marine officers and was serving as Third Mate. This was before the days when Guam's main north shore beaches were lined with luxury hotels, and so I was facing a grim layover at a flophouse with more roaches than guests. I couldn't have afforded a decent hotel then even if one had existed, so I quickly accepted his invitation to dinner aboard, and a berth for a few days while they took on cargo.

Over dinner in the officer's mess that evening, he mentioned that one of their first ports of call was the main island of Weno in Truk Lagoon. Being a WWII history buff, I was well aware of Operation Hailstorm, the epic battle that saw more than 80 Japanese ships and 250 aircraft sunk in February 1944. It was now coming up on the 30th anniversary of that battle and, without much hope I asked if I might accompany the ship there to explore a bit. Luck was mine. The captain welcomed having another licensed Merchant Marine officer aboard as they were short-handed, and I evened out the watch sections. I volunteered for 0400-0800 bridge watch that nobody wanted and we cast off for Truk two nights later.

This was also before the days of well-outfitted liveaboard dive boats. All that existed was a barebones land-based diving service being started up by the legendary Kimiuo Aisek. As a 17-year old, Kimiuo had witnessed that WWII battle in 1944 and was still in the process of locating the shipwrecks as dive sites. Somehow it seemed unreal to talk with a man who'd actually experienced the carnage, escaped the Japanese occupation forces, and gone on to pioneer what would become the wreck diving Mecca of the world.

While the ship off-loaded, I enjoyed his diving hospitality and was treated to some incredible, virgin wrecks. But my story is not about the diving. It's about a unique tradition of ocean transiting developed by the Micronesians from centuries long past.

Mariner's Skill

Those who mastered this ability became known simply as 'The Navigators' and they voyaged across thousands of miles of the Pacific in dugout canoes and primitive sailing craft without the aid of a compass, charts, sextants, or even a rudimentary form of celestial dead reckoning. I asked Kimiuo about The Navigators and while he was quick to concede he knew little about them, he did offer to introduce me to one of the few remaining Navigators, a man who was then in his late 80s, living on distant Polle on the far west side of the lagoon. He dispatched me one afternoon with a guide in a leaky wooden launch powered by an outboard motor that punched us along at about five knots. It was a long trip. I arrived just before sunset and was welcomed ashore for a dinner of fresh fish and



Archival photograph of a Micronesian navigator circa 1901. Records suggest that Chuuk, Palau and Ponape produced the majority of skilled navigators in this region of the Pacific.

steamed rice prepared over a cook fire. I had brought a case of semi-cold beer and was immediately the most popular guest to visit in years.

The Navigator, whose name escapes my memory now, was happy to explain how he and his ancestors managed open ocean crossings using a methodology based on waves and swells. I was left utterly bewildered listening to his narrative about the direction

of waves, the frequency and period of the swell, height of crests, and how they impacted the hulls of their small boats and how all this – somehow – could be translated into steering a course without a compass. I prided myself on my own navigation skills, derived from mathematical calculations, star and sun sights transposed by sextant, the origin of Bowditch's rules, and a good set of parallel rulers and conventional charts. My mariner's world – it proved – was as confusing to him as his was to me.

We talked for hours. I departed for Weno late that night without advancing my knowledge one iota. The Navigator assured me that western mariners who had not grown up in the culture would never understand and that I shouldn't feel too badly over my failings. He lamented that it was a lost art to all but a handful of Micronesians, soon to be gone entirely, forgotten by the next generation. His gentle reflections on my inability to grasp his art were of little comfort. I rejoined my ship with a sense of relief to be back in the 20th century, yet my failure to understand, even vaguely, theories and explanations that just didn't compute, left me feeling intellectually conflicted.

The Passage Of Time

Twenty years went by. When I returned – in the modern age of diving – I was a photojournalist shooting a big feature following the 50th anniversary of the Operation Hailstorm battle. This time I was hosted by Captain Lance Higgs in gratuitous luxury aboard his 180-foot (55m) dive ship *Thorfinn*. All these years later most of the wrecks were charted, allowing my able and intrepid assistant Cathryn Castle and me two weeks of exploration, spending most days and early evenings underwater.

Over dinner one night, I asked Lance if he'd ever tried his hand at the old Micronesian navigator's craft. He conceded the theory of it escaped him as well, not withstanding the fact he'd married a local woman and employed about a dozen of her relatives in his diving operation. He'd also met the elderly gentleman I'd spent time with years before, but said that, sadly, he had passed away.

Then he told a story so compelling I sat transfixed as he spun the tale.

In the late 1970s a U.S. oceanographic survey vessel was on a two-year voyage to update the vastly incomplete and inaccurate charts of much of the area, including the more remote and uninhabited atolls that fringed the wide footprint of Micronesia and other far-flung regions of the Pacific. They made port in Weno for supplies and also took on some replacement crew as deckhands before resuming their surveying mission.

Once at sea, a huge typhoon blew up and the captain made for a distant atoll hoping to get inside via the only channel through the barrier reef. The relatively protected anchorage inside was a good place to ride out the storm. As the winds increased, the rain came down in sheets, and visibility rapidly decreased. Now this was back in the days before Sat-Nav, GPS, and no Loran existed out there to assist in navigation. As the wind topped 130 knots and 30-foot (10m) waves blew spray over the bridge of the 260-foot (80m) ship, the captain knew that the odds of finding the pass in the barrier reef were all but impossible and that he'd have no choice but to seek open ocean and ride things out. It was a grim scenario.

At that point, his Chief Mate, hesitantly, offered a suggestion. He told the captain that when they were in Truk, they'd taken on local crew, among them a young man who was the grandson of the last of



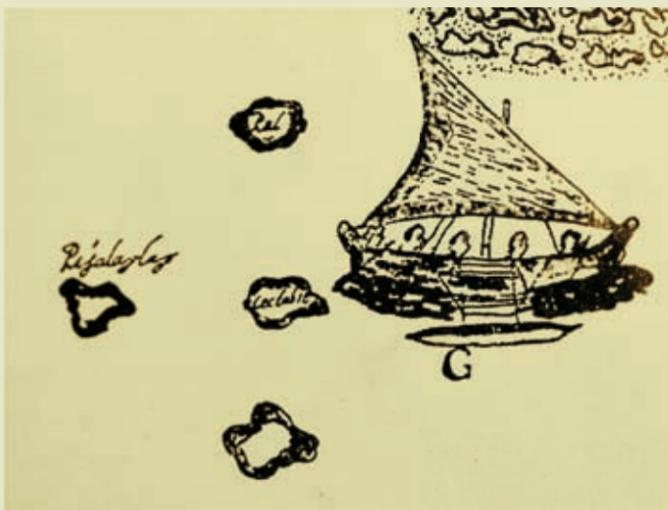
This drawing of five paddlers dates to the late 19th century or early 20th century.

The Navigators who possessed the ability to steer a course without need of visibility, stars, or even charts. "Maybe he can locate the atoll from our last fix," he said.

The captain was dismissive of such 'witchcraft' but as the seas increased and the ship heeled more violently with each massive swell, he ordered the mate to bring the teenager to the bridge. Soon the barefoot young man arrived, wearing a ragged pair of shorts and tee shirt and sporting long dark hair held back in a ponytail by a tortoise shell ring. His appearance did not instill confidence in the captain. But, as the saying goes, any port in a storm!

"Son, we're trying for the atoll and need to find the entrance pass before the storm gets any worse. We can't get a fix and the sea clutter has made the radar useless. Do you have any idea where we are and how to find the channel?"

His grandfather, the same wise man who I'd spent an evening with on Polle several years before, had mentored the boy who simply nodded and said he needed to go out on the wing deck from where he'd relay directions to the captain. He opened the bridge door and stepped out into the full fury of the storm without hesitation. Ducking down behind the steel bulwark, he peered into the storm and seas ahead.



This original Micronesian tribal drawing of an outrigger canoe circa 18th century is in Micronesia's Belau National Museum in Palau. The museum's new building complex opened September 30, 2005, to commemorate the institution's 50th anniversary.

After about ten minutes, he turned and began giving commands. "Come to port 15 degrees for 20 minutes." This was followed by silence. Then he said, "Now head due east and hold course for exactly 12 minutes."

The captain instructed the helmsman to follow the boy's maneuvering commands while inwardly praying that he was not going to end up explaining to a court of inquiry how he had run his ship up on a remote barrier reef because he'd asked a teenager to navigate employing an ancient art that no one else aboard understood even remotely.

As the last of the light faded into a raging storm of darkness, the boy gave a rapid fire of commands that had the ship on several changing bearings that defied explanation. Just as the captain and mate were about to abandon this plan and take their chances in the open sea, they looked to starboard where sea was breaking on the barrier reef less than 30 feet (10m) away. To port they were even closer to the reef but they were in the pass and they were entering the lagoon. The young man had found it. As the waves lessened and the ship stabilized, the boy walked back on to the bridge soaking wet

and dripping rain and sea water over the teak decks.

"You can steer ahead for ten more minutes and then we'll be in about 40 feet (12m) of water with good holding ground to anchor in," the young man said. "We'll be safe here until the typhoon ends."

The captain mustered the deck and anchor crew into action and, just as the boy predicted, the soundings shallowed and the ship was positioned in the lee of the central island. Once secured, the captain turned to the boy and thanked him profusely for his uncanny skill bringing them all to safety. The boy simply nodded and asked if he was excused.

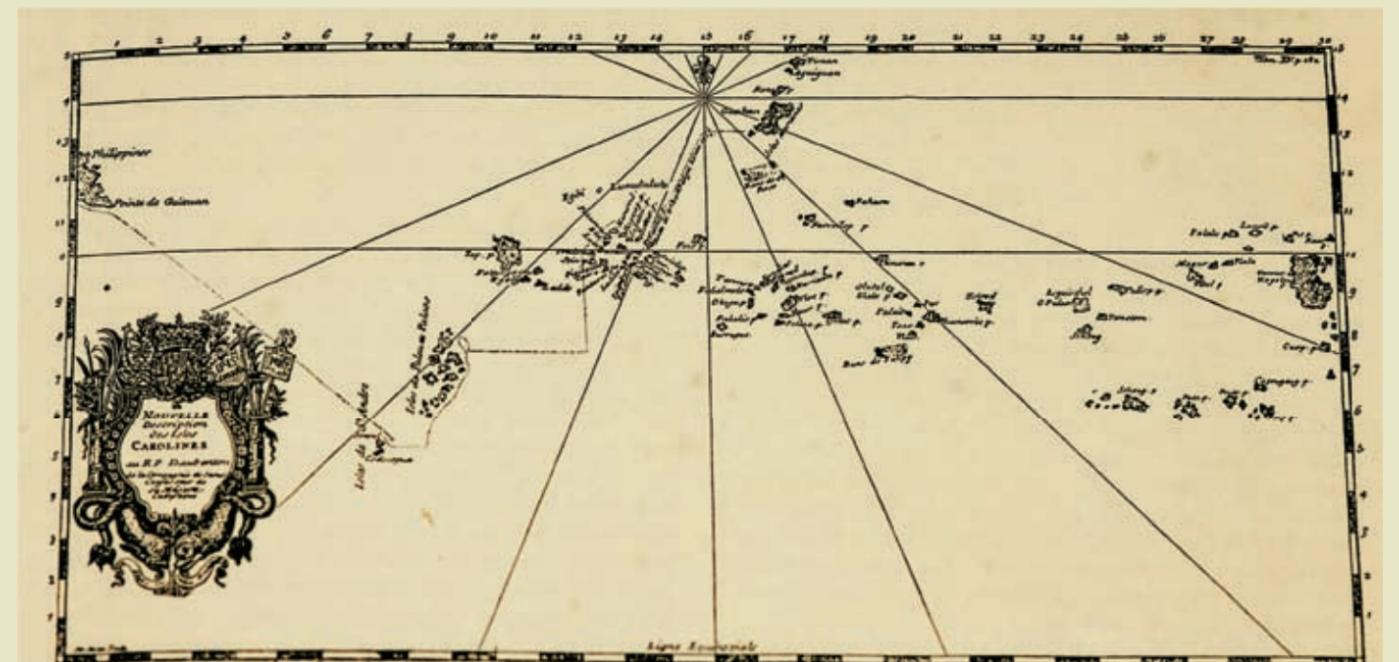
The captain said, "Yes, but can I ask you one last question?"

The boy nodded again.

"How did you know the pass was there through the barrier reef?"

The boy looked at him impassively and simply replied, "It's always been there."

When Lance finished the story we both sat back in silence. Then I went out to the bar, poured us each a glass of Scotch and we banged glasses together in an unspoken tribute to The Navigator and the tradition that he had passed on to his grandson. 🍀



A chart of the Caroline Islands group circa 17th century.