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# WWII SHIPPING NEWS

# IS NOW SURFACING

: TEXT LANCE ROBB; IMAGES STUART SHAW &amp; LANCE ROBB

> DURING WORLD WAR II THE GULF OF THAILAND WAS A MAJOR SHIPPING LANE FOR JAPANESE MERCHANT SHIPS DELIVERING TROOPS AND SUPPLIES, RETURNING TO JAPAN CARRYING RAW MATERIALS AND PRISONERS OF WAR. THE LARGE NUMBER OF SHIPS ON THE MOVE ATTRACTED AN EVEN LARGER FORCE OF ALLIED WARSHIPS AND SUBMARINES.

The periscope shears USS Lagarto encrusted in coral and fisherman's nets



Since I was young I've wanted to dive those legendary locations where some of the Second World War's great battles took place. Now, with modern deep diving technology, mixed gas diving, reliable equipment, and closed circuit rebreathers, many deeper wrecks previously undiveable by recreational standards are reachable by properly trained technical divers. Dives to 100 metres and beyond are feasible for almost anyone physically fit and dedicated enough. Exploring seldom dived wrecks is thrilling – you may discover something new and even uncover a piece of history previously unknown; artefacts littered about the wrecks conjure up all sorts of thoughts about the fate of the sailors who used them last.

In 2008 I reunited with dive buddy Stuey Shaw on MV Trident for their 'Hammerhead Tour'. The aim was to dive three Japanese Marus (merchantmen) already found and dived out of the four ships the US submarine USS Hammerhead sank during the latter part of WW2. As the trip ended I decided to book the boat for the following May to look for the last missing Maru sunk by

USS Hammerhead, the Kinrei Maru, plus the Tairyu Maru which the Dutch submarine O-19 sank earlier in 1942. We'd also visit the USS Lagarto, the only US submarine lost in the Gulf of Thailand during WW2. I'd wanted to dive her since hearing she'd been found because I'd already dived the Japanese mine layer IJN Hatsutaka which was responsible for sinking her in 1945. This time we'd have seven days exploring the Gulf of Thailand.

The Trident's usual port is Koh Tao, but due the distance we had to travel to reach these sites it was decided to join the boat at Koh Samui. That afternoon we assembled equipment, pumped tanks and settled in. Around 7.00pm we slipped the lines and motored until mid morning next day to reach our first mark. Most of us went to the wheelhouse and stayed glued to the sounder looking for a big red lump protruding from the Gulf's normally flat sandy bottom. But a flat line indicated there was little there, so the skipper set up a grid and we searched for another 20 minutes before moving on to investigate the next mark. It's not uncommon for Thai fishers to mark fish attractors – perhaps this mark had been removed or drifted away?

1 Empty 51b side middle torpedo tube outer door still open shows she went down fighting  
2 Lance inspects the huge crater in the Lagarto's Port side caused by a depth charge direct hit  
3 The massive after deck gun mounting, an impressive sight usually hidden by the deck plating  
4 Lance looking at the anti-aircraft gun torn from its mounting by fisherman's nets

