

Main: HMS Hermes 4" ready to use ammunition locker

Top: Looking from the bridge towards the stern

Bottom: A diver explores Hermes stern



> THREE, TWO, ONE!
SOME FIVE MILES OUT
INTO THE BAY OF BENGAL
WE ROLLED BACK OFF THE
SMALL FIBREGLASS SKIFF.
THE HEAVY 12 LITRE
BAILOUT TANK FORCED ME
INTO A FULL SOMERSAULT
BEFORE I SURFACED NEXT
TO THE BOAT. OUR
SMILING SKIPPER SHERRIF
HELD OUT MY CAMERA.

: ANDREW FOCK

ON HERMES' WINGS

I quickly checked my CCR displays and the camera; Les was already descending towards the shotline some 20 metres away – but with 40+ metre visibility and no current, why wouldn't he! I began my free fall and at 20 metres the reassuring flashing of my HUD told me the unit had switched to the high set point of 1.3 ata. A 600ft aircraft carrier began to take shape below me. This was going to be some dive!

1918 With the war in Europe reaching its climax, the Royal Navy was at its peak. Early experiments converting the battlecruiser HMS *Furious* to an aircraft carrier had demonstrated the potential of aircraft at sea, but obviously a better solution was needed. It was decided to build a small carrier from the ground up.

For the first time wind tunnel experiments were conducted on a warship and these resulted in the now standard configuration of an island superstructure to starboard with enclosed bow and hanger

arrangements. The stern was left open for launching and retrieving of float planes.

Laid down in 1918, launched in 1919, her completion was delayed until 1923 due to post war economics. Though only 12,500 tons and 598ft long, the small aircraft of the period meant *Hermes* was more than adequate and was deemed a success. But by the late 1930s her 26 knot top speed wasn't considered adequate and her size was too small to support modern fighters or a decent-sized strike force. WWII and the advent of escort carriers would prove the utility and value of ships of this size, but by then it would be too late.

1942 In April the war was not going too well. Singapore, that 'impregnable British fortress' had fallen, as had the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines. Every major Allied warship in the South China and Java Seas had been sunk or chased away. Now, flush from destroying the American Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbour, Kido Butai,



Main: The Hermes prop surrounded by fish
Top: The HMS Hermes in her prime
Middle: Stern view of HMS Hermes
Bottom: The sinking of HMS Hermes

Top right: A lionfish living on the wreck
Bottom right: Hermes' 5.5" gun

the Imperial Japanese Navy's First Carrier Air Fleet had swept into the Indian Ocean. They'd destroyed Darwin, massacred the ships fleeing Java, and now in the Bay of Bengal had sunk 113,000 tons of British shipping, preventing resupply of British forces in Burma.

Admiral Somerville had been sent out with the hastily prepared 'Eastern Fleet',

// A DIVE ON HERMES IS ONE OF THOSE UNFORGETTABLE MOMENTS...
THERE IS SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE. //

comprising two modern fleet carriers and four old WWI battle ships, to counter this threat. But he harboured no illusions. The British carrier aircraft were no match for the Japanese Zeros, Kates and Vals, and he was at risk of becoming the first British Admiral in a hundred years to lose an entire fleet. As the Japanese approached Ceylon (Sri Lanka) he wisely removed his ships to a secret anchorage in the Maldives. The Japanese, finding Colombo harbour empty, took out two British heavy

cruisers racing to join Somerville to the south. In 15 minutes, both were sunk and 1000 men were in the water.

Japanese Admiral Nagumo assumed the British fleet must be on the east coast at Trincomalee, and ordered an attack there on 9 April. Warned of the impending attack by a patrolling catalina, the last two major warships, HMS *Hermes*, a light fleet carrier, and HMAS *Vampire*, her

destroyer escort, raced south in an attempt to escape the approaching storm... as Winston Churchill was to put it, "The most dangerous moments".

DISASTER OFF BATALOEA In the early morning of 9 April 1942 the Japanese arrived over Trincomalee to find the harbour empty. After decimating local fighters sent to intercept them, they surprised, while returning to their carriers

one of the scouts spotted a small carrier and its escort some 70 miles to the south off Batticaloa. Nagumo immediately launched a strike force of 84 dive bombers. Shortly after 10am these aircraft were spotted by *Hermes*, now steaming back towards Trincomalee hoping for fighter protection, not realising it had already been largely destroyed.

In what was to be one of the most accurate bombing attacks of the war, crack Japanese aviators plummeted down on the hapless carrier, scoring some 41 hits in 10 minutes. *Hermes* rolled over to port and her bow slid beneath the waves, Captain Onslow called for the crew to abandon ship, but some 302 officers and men were to die with her. With *Hermes* sinking, the Japanese turned their attention to HMAS *Vampire*. Three hits later, she too joined *Hermes* on the bottom of the Bay of Bengal.

2010 Today HMS *Hermes* lies in 53 metres on her port side. 30 years of civil war and reduced access by fishermen have resulted in her hosting fish of unprecedented size and number.

A dive on *Hermes* is unforgettable. Whether you're touched by the history, awed by the size of the wreck, or amazed by the sheer number and size of fish around and in her, there's something here for everyone.

Despite previous reports, *Hermes* lies almost two-thirds inverted on her port side

with her starboard bilge keel at 44 metres. Her flight deck and hangar, pumelled by Japanese bombs and ravaged by fire, have largely peeled off and now lie jumbled on the sea floor.

Black corals adorn the hull, huge gorgonian fans cover the remaining superstructure, and large groupers and potato cods guard her interior, while massive schools of trevally and dogtooth tuna hunt around her exterior.

Ready-to-use 4-inch ammunition still lies in its locker near the forward anti-aircraft guns, a 20mm Oerlikon points skyward. Is this the gun that shot down one of the four Japanese bombers lost that day? A split in the bow reveals the crew's heads (toilets) and further aft, with the flight deck gone, the capstans are now exposed. The bridge is covered by part of the flight deck and has been crushed down into the hull, but the 5.5 spotting top with its rangefinder is spectacular.



SRI LANKA TRAVEL FACTS

Travel to and through Sri Lanka has only recently become possible due to the end of the civil war and the recent elections. International flights arrive in Colombo, a 3 hour flight from Singapore, at about midnight local time, requiring a stopover in or near Colombo. The trip across the country, while not far by western standards, is hampered by a chaotic road network and takes over 8 hours. However, there's the chance of stopping on the way to see several interesting sites including Buddhist temples and ancient ruins.

Diving operations: At present these are generously described as spartan! We stayed at the Deep Blue Diving Resort Batticaloa. Facilities are basic and divers are taken to the site in small fibreglass ex-fishing boats. There are no radios or backup plans and the nearest recompression chamber in Trincomalee is run by the Navy. While we were there only a single cylinder of emergency O2 was available on the boats and there was insufficient equipment to properly set up decompression lines and bailout cylinders. Helium and Oxygen were relatively easily sourced but after much hassle we arranged to ship in a pallet of Sorb. All our dives were on closed circuit rebreathers using Trimix diluent, however, a limited number of manifolded twin sets are also available. Be warned that the current compressor would be kindly described as @\$\$. With the correct infrastructure, the Sri Lankans will have one of the finest wreck dives in the world (if they can control the fishing on it). When that infrastructure is in place I'll be back in a flash!



No visit is complete without diving the stern – both massive props are still in place, though getting a photo can be difficult because of all the fish in the way!


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Top left: Hermes' rangefinder
Top right: Hermes' 4" HA gun
Bottom: Returning from a great dive



LINK> [wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Hermes_\(95\)](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Hermes_(95))



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