

FROM TRAGEDY TO TREASURE

■ ■ ■ BRIAN HARRIS



My son Mark and I had long wanted to make a documentary about this wreck diving Mecca and after months of planning, research and script preparation, our dream of many years had become a reality. At last we'd reached this beautiful coral ringed lagoon where over 70 ships and hundreds of aircraft lay quietly on the sandy bottom waiting to be explored and photographed.

Truk (now officially 'Chuuk') is in the Caroline Islands in the North Pacific about 3000 kilometres northeast of Australia. The lagoon itself is roughly 60 kilometres across and dotted with small islands. This perfectly sheltered shipping harbour was the main Japanese base in the Pacific during WW2. It seems almost frozen in time; apart from the cars that now crawl along the pot-holed road, it's probably changed very little over the past 60 years. There are little stalls and tiny tin-roofed shops selling local produce and crafts scattered along the roadside; the friendly local people are very relaxed and unhurried.

As we drove to our hotel, I tried to imagine what it must have been like here during those couple of days in February 1944 when wave after wave of American aircraft were

attacking – the crash and thunder of exploding bombs and machine gun fire mingling with the smoke from burning ships and shore installations... the pandemonium, horror and tragedy of war must have descended on this tranquil spot like some nightmare straight from hell. But today the sun beamed down from a perfectly clear sky and the water was that beautiful blue you only seem to find in the tropical Pacific, and my thoughts turned to the peaceful wrecks lying beneath the surface and the diving adventures we were looking forward to.

We soon settled in at the Truk Stop hotel and were keen to check out the facilities and meet the people we'd be working with on the project. The Truk Lagoon Dive Centre is part of the hotel complex and we were delighted with the neat and tidy dive shop, walk-in gear storage/drying lockers, great wash tubs and dive shower and the beautiful well fitted out Pro-42 dive boat tied up at the hotel jetty. This has to be one of the best and most convenient dive setups that we've seen anywhere in the world. After a leisurely breakfast you stroll 20 metres or so to your dive locker, place your gear on one of the platform trolleys provided and wheel it straight on to the jetty and out to the dive boat. At the end of

T H E F A B U L O U S W R E C K S O F T R U K L A G O O N

THE LAGOON HAD BARELY A RIPPLE. WHEN I SPLASHED IN AND LOOKED DOWN FROM THE SURFACE, THE MAGNIFICENCE ALMOST TOOK MY BREATH AWAY. A HUGE WRECK STRETCHED INTO THE DISTANCE IN BOTH DIRECTIONS IN BEAUTIFUL CLEAR BLUE 32° C WATER. NO NEED TO GO DOWN THE MOORING LINE. NO CURRENT OR POOR VIZ TO CONTEND WITH. JUST LET THE AIR OUT OF YOUR BCD, EXHALE AND DRIFT GENTLY DOWN TO START EXPLORING THIS DIVER'S DREAM.



Left page: Auxiliary telegraph and Voice Pipe on the Bridge Wing of the *Shinkoko Maru*
This page: Medical Kit on the *Fujikawa Maru*



This page: Zero Fighter lies upside down in 8 metres off Etan Island
 Inside the Central Deckhouse structure on the *Fujikawa Maru*
 The Cockpit of a Zero Fighter in the No 2 Hold of the *Fujikawa Maru*
 Right page: Lisa with beautiful little Japanese Lady statuette found on the *Nippo Maru*
 Divers entering the Betty Bomber through aft side gun turret hole in fuselage
 A gas mask on the *Nippo Maru*
 This human skull rests within the *Fujikawa Maru*



the day's diving you put your gear back on the trolley and wheel it to the wash tubs right beside the dive lockers. Wash it down and hang it straight on the pegs in your walk-in locker, lock the door and head off for a cold beer! If you're doing three to four dives a day as we were, the boat comes back for lunch and you can leave everything onboard, have lunch, change camera and light batteries etc, then stroll back to the boat where your gear's been set up with fresh tanks ready to go. This was all so good ... had I passed away and gone to Diver's Heaven??

The best part however was still to come. The diving. We set off on the Bottom Lover (I don't know if the name refers to the ocean bed or the shapely bikini clad nether regions of some of the female divers aboard wriggling into their wet suits! I did notice that both our dive masters at these crucial times seemed to be somewhat distracted!!

We skimmed along between the Islands to our first dive site, the *Fujikawa Maru* which is in 36 metres off Dublon Island. There's so much to be seen on this ship alone that one could make dozens of dives on her without uncovering all of her mysteries. Everything from the Zero fighters in the No 2 hold, the bow and stern guns on the deck, the passageways and huge open area of the central deckhouse/bridge structure, the ceramic tiled bathroom and latrine area, the engine room and machine shop to the gaping torpedo hole in the starboard side of the hull, all beckon for further exploration.

The wrecks at Truk give divers the best of both worlds. They have the allure and mystery of having gone to the bottom 60 years ago by bomb, aerial torpedo and strafing damage and have also become artificial reefs located on an open sandy bottom providing a concentrated habitat for every conceivable marine creature and organism. What a wonderful opportunity to look, examine, explore and photograph in warm, clear, current and surge free, sun soaked water!

The hotel diving staff were fantastic and did everything possible to assist us. We wanted to do three dives on each of the eleven wrecks we intended to document. First dive to get an overview and perimeter and superstructure footage, second dive to penetrate and capture particular points of interest, then a third dive to tidy up any bits we'd missed or wanted to re-film for some technical reason. They managed to fit all this in yet still satisfy all the other divers on board.

Our two permanent dive guides Eram and LoLo were absolutely outstanding. They've logged literally thousands of dives on the Truk wrecks and their diving skills gained our immediate confidence to take us safely through some of the deeper and totally confined areas we needed to penetrate. The boat skipper Serko placed us unerringly right on top of each wreck without any electronic navigational aids. This was a tribute to his skill and local knowledge, as the mooring buoys are mostly tethered five metres below the surface and aren't visible until you're directly over them. William and the

other boys who crewed were also great, always ready to help with camera gear etc.

When diving the wrecks you see unfolding before you a complete panorama of war machinery and reminders of those who lived and died aboard these now silent sentinels of the sea. Everything from the tanks on the decks of the *Nippo Maru* and the *San Francisco Maru*, the Zero fighters in the hold of the *Fujikawa Maru*, the deck guns of the destroyer *Fumitsuki*, the huge 18 inch diameter 1200kg naval shells on the *Yamagiri Maru*, the torpedoes and submarine periscopes on the *Heian Maru*, the mines and depth charges on the *San Francisco Maru*, to the medical surgery and operating table on the *Shinkoku Maru* – all of this is interlaced with items of everyday personal use, bowls, plates, bottles, kettles, telephones, cooking pots, binoculars, gas masks, ammunition etc, are silent testimony to the futility of war.

The most sobering experience of all is to see resting gently in the silt a human bone or perhaps even a human skull from that conflict. These ships and aircraft are still the final resting places and memorials of so many who perished here and their tombs and remains should always be treated with the greatest respect.

I can't possibly cover all of these splendid ships adequately here, but each one is a new adventure with its own tragic story of destruction and loss of life, unique points of special

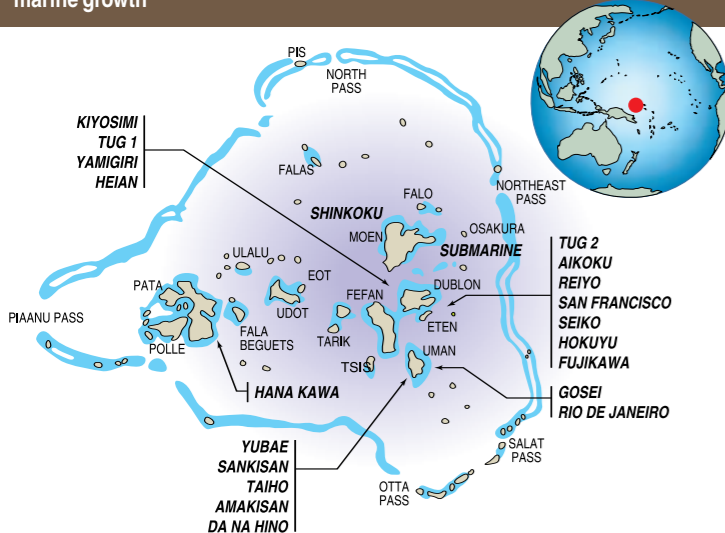
interest and ethereal beauty. They range in depth from 15 metres to 70 metres but most can virtually be completely explored without exceeding 40 metres and without long deco stops. At the deeper end of the scale the *San Francisco Maru* at 60 metres offers plenty of challenge for suitably qualified divers to exercise their skills and penetrate areas where very few people have previously explored.

I found the aircraft wrecks located in shallow water just off the now overgrown airstrip on Etan Island very interesting. The Zero fighter is virtually completely intact in only eight metres and lies upside down with the cockpit buried in the sandy bottom. The landing wheels were down and apparently this plane was shot down while taking off at the end of the strip. The twin 20 mm machine guns protruding from the wings are a reminder that this was a potent war machine and I wondered if the remains of the unfortunate pilot are still trapped in that cockpit .

The Betty Bomber lies upright in 20 metres and obviously hit the water at considerable speed. The engines were torn from the wings on impact and travelled another 60-70 metres before coming to rest on the bottom. The nose was shattered but the rest of the fuselage and most of the wings are virtually intact. Divers can enter through one of the aft side gun turret openings or the upper rear gun turret opening and swim along through the fuselage and exit at the shattered nose. Artifacts are scattered around including one of the machine



This page: Truk Stop Pro-42 dive boat "Bottom Lover" is very well equipped
A pair of Binoculars rest on the deck of the Fumizuki Destroyer
Main telegraph on the Shinkoko Maru is heavily encrusted with colourful marine growth



guns, the aircraft toilet, oxygen cylinders, radios etc. Did she run out of fuel after a raid and failed to make it back to the strip, or was she shot down during those couple of tumultuous days of attack? The answers are probably lost forever along with her unfortunate crew.

Night dives on the wrecks are wonderful, as the shallower shipwrecks in particular have become complete ecosystems with spectacular soft corals, anemones, nudibranches and colourful fish and marine creatures carpeting every exposed surface. When you combine all of this with the eerie beauty of the darkened wreck and shadowy superstructure, together with the ever questing beams of the divers torches, an atmosphere is created which will forever have a special place in the diver's memory.

We'd allowed 14 diving days and approximately 40 dives to cover the nine ships and two aircraft the documentary would focus on. We came away with over 15 hours of digital video footage and hundreds of still shots of these ocean treasures. We also covered some of the land attractions including beautiful little Picnic Island plus the Japanese gun emplacements and underground connecting tunnel system high on the hillside overlooking the harbour and airstrip.

There are many more wrecks here we want to explore further. This has to be the finest wreck diving location on earth. If you're interested in shipwrecks and the marine habitats they've developed, you simply must visit this paradise. But be warned... once you've dived at Truk it may spoil you for diving anywhere else in the world. See you there!

Our documentary covering all eleven wrecks is available on DVD from March 2004. For information contact Mark on email mbhprods@optusnet.com.au

The Trukstop Hotel and Dive Centre have a website at www.trukstop.com or you can email them on info@trukstop.com

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