

# BRUTALITY TRANSFORMED

**DROPPING DOWN THE DESCENT LINE WAS LIKE A FREE FALL IN WARM TREACLE. AT 30 METRES THE OCEAN BELOW GREW DARKER WITH NO SIGN OF THE WRECK AS I FLOATED SPREAD-EAGLED DOWN THE VERTICAL ANCHOR ROPE. AT 40 METRES DARKER PATCHES BEGAN TO TAKE SHAPE; OPEN HATCHES ON THE UPPER DECK OF THE AIKOKU MARU, A 150 METRE LONG FREIGHTER AND TROOP CARRIER UPRIGHT IN 64 METRES IN TRUK LAGOON.**

**M**y guide Bako Koky turned and swam towards the fat smoke stack jutting upwards. Roughly amidships, the stack should have marked the middle of the wreck but immediately beyond the large chubby funnel the ship disappeared into torn and jagged slabs of steel twisted and ripped with an unbelievable force. Masses of mauve jellyfish pulsated where the forward half should have been. Swimming back towards an open hatch and a large cannon mounted at the stern, we passed a stack of human remains, a reminder that the Truk shipwrecks are war graves, then a plaque to

commemorate Kimiuro Aisek, the father of Truk wreck diving.

On February 17 and 18, 1944 Kimiuro, then aged 17, witnessed the attack by US air forces launched from aircraft carriers in what was called 'Operation Hailstone'. The result of that fierce battle are the 48 diveable wrecks ( with a few more yet to be found) in Truk Lagoon. Most of the wrecks in these sheltered waters are armed supply and cargo ships as opposed to battleships or destroyers, hence the *Maru* suffix of

most wreck names. On the run after their defeat in the Coral Sea, the Japanese used the calm safety of Truk Lagoon to repair, refit and refuel their fighting fleet. Like fat ducks in a pond, the fleet was relatively easy pickings for the surprise US air attack that sealed the fate of the Japanese navy.

While unloading munitions, troops and machinery, the near fully-laden *Aikoku Maru* was set upon by two US torpedo bombers. The first one to dive into attack was hit by the *Aikoku's* deck

guns, bursting into flames but continuing on to land directly into the open forward hold. The resulting explosion of the munitions ignited by the bomber looked like a miniature atomic blast. Two Japanese soldiers who survived the explosion were picked up off the deck by the shock wave and thrown far up and out over the lagoon. One of them described seeing the entire front of the ship lifting up and being pitched far forward into the ocean. The remains of the ship sank immediately, drowning all those caught inside.



Background- Large cannon on bow of the Kansho Maru.

Left from the top -

Sweepers schooling in cockpit of Japanese Betty Bomber.

Small tank, type 95 with 37mm gun, on the deck of the San Francisco Maru.

Diver inspecting Japanese Zero fighter lying upside-down in lagoon shallows.

**SHRUGGING OFF THE IMMENSITY OF THE SHIPS AND THE SHEER NUMBER OF WRECKS I BEGAN TO SEE THE HUMAN SIDE OF THINGS.**



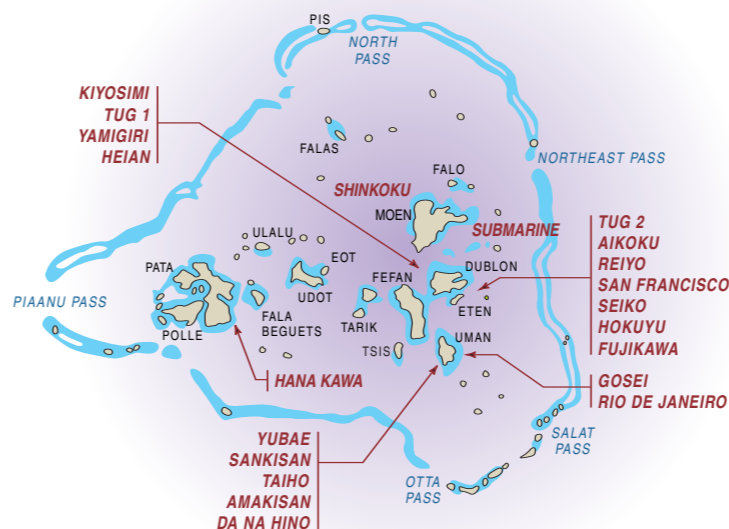
Right - Troop transport truck on the deck of the San Francisco Maru.  
 Large artillery shells balanced on a beam in the hold in the Heian Maru.  
 Bath in the officers bathroom on the Shinkoku Maru.  
 Below centre - Oven and cooking top in the galley on the Fujikawa Maru

hold guarded by a large bow gun. Old photographs of the land mines stacked to within inches of the upper deck can't be replicated today because some of the locals have discovered that the still-active explosives within the mines can be recovered to make homemade bombs for use in blast fishing. Many layers of the mines have been taken, with the occasional death or maimed armless citizen evidence of their still lethal nature.

In similar depths is the *Seiko Maru*. Penetrating into the pitch-dark holds is initially unnerving, especially when your torch is as small and temperamental as mine, barely illuminating the massive torpedoes lying in the silt or leaning drunkenly against the rusting walls of the hold. Trying to hold the torch in my left hand while I shot with my right using the tiny patch of yellow as an aiming point was difficult enough, but then the torch blinked out and I was alone in the eye-sucking dark surrounded by high explosives in a black tomb over 40 metres down. A small worm of anxiety wiggled in the back of my brain. I rattled the torch about and tapped it against my strobe arms. Reluctantly it dredged up a pitiful orange glow, allowing me to quickly fire off a few shots before beating a hasty retreat back out into the open gloom. Next time I'll spend more than \$1.50 on batteries!

Each morning Baco and I started on a deep wreck then dived two shallower wrecks later in the day. Initially I'd been part of a large group of divers led by Geoff Skinner from Always Dive Travel but they'd left after a few days allowing me the luxury of my own guide as I was the sole occupant of the *Thorfinn*, Truk's original liveboard dive vessel. Free of the massed thrashing fins and huge clouds of silt, Baco and I revisited some wrecks and explored new ones (for me) to photograph their contents in peace.

One of my favourites was the *Heian Maru* on it's side in 36 metres between Dublon and Moen Islands. Once inside the labyrinth of holds and rooms it was easy to become disoriented with walls as roofs and roofs as walls. Torpedoes with double screws to provide a more stable trajectory were stacked together, slowly rusting away. A small storeroom once neatly stacked with new ceramic bowls spewed out it's contents, their original packaging still there

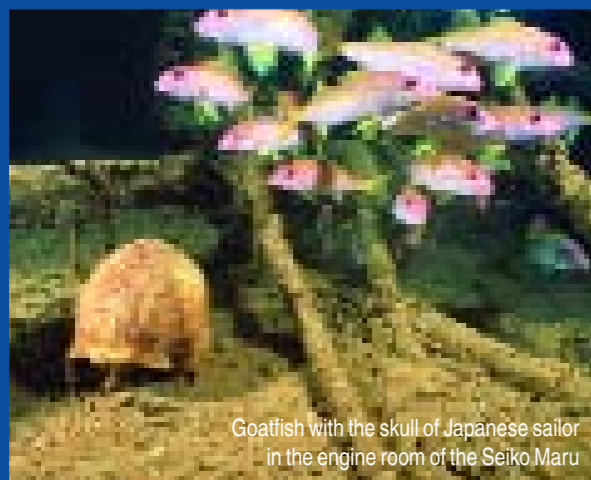


Interior of cockpit of Zero fighter aeroplane in forward hold on the Fujikawa Maru.

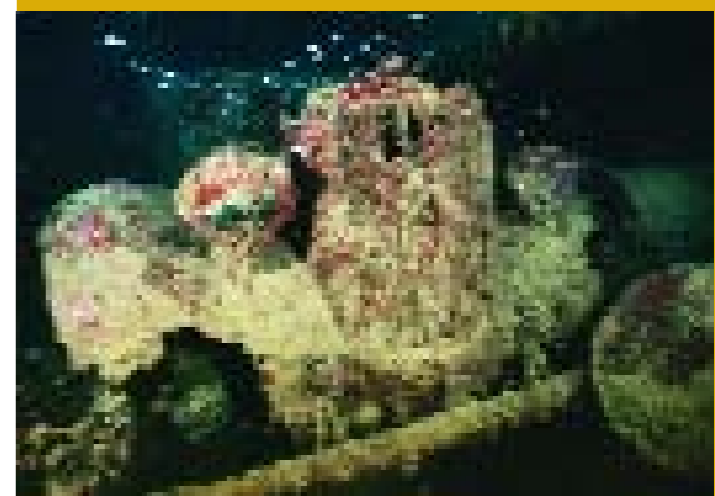
My head buzzing with narcosis, I surveyed the relatively intact rear half of the ship. Guns still pointing skywards, they could only mimic their last shots as fat pulsing jellyfish wafted past and tense dogtooth tuna flicked their way through the superstructure. With my dive computer indicating a 20 minute deco, Baco and I swam to the anchor line and began our ascent, the remains of the once powerful ship fading into the deep green haze.

I'm not a wreck diver. I love marine life but dead boats didn't do anything for me. Sure, if they're covered in marine life like the S.S. *Yongala*, then I may be interested but otherwise they're about as interesting as an empty coke can. But after two days of looking for fish to photograph, the history, tragedy and drama of the Truk story began to take hold of me. Shrugging off the immensity of the ships and the sheer number of wrecks I began to see the human side of things. Little signs like a sailor's sandal lying in the rust-coloured silt, a fragile cup unbroken by the violent two day attack, a tattered book, huge woks on drowned stoves inspiring ghosts of steaming meals, or the simple human functions indicated by a bath or toilet. I set about photographing the human touches that spoke silently of a past world gone mad.

Perhaps the most popular wreck dive in Truk is the *San Francisco Maru*, adventurously deep and laden with fascinating and spooky cargo; three tanks and a truck on the front deck, more trucks below and masses of land mines and munitions in the forward



Goafish with the skull of Japanese sailor in the engine room of the Seiko Maru





Left - Land mines stacked in forward hold of the San Francisco Maru  
Remains of bicycle in the Seiko Maru  
Diver with telegraph control for communication with engine room on the Nippo Maru

Below right - Diver entering the cockpit through nose of a Japanese Betty Bomber  
Captured American Howitzer gun, 47mm Anti-Tank armour piercing guns type M1, on the deck of the Nippo Maru



protecting some of the brittle cups. In another room a number of large artillery shells lay balanced on a beam, having fallen there when the ship capsized. The black and red rusted interior of the gloomy inner rooms gave way to a green encrusted exterior with large oysters, sponges and other growth covering everything on the ship's outer surface.

Swimming along one of the outer companionways, now near the top of the tipped wreck, we found stacks of replacement periscopes, their once well-oiled and slick machined surfaces slowly etching away. Exiting at the rear of the ship we could see one of the huge props, now padded with a garment of sponges and soft corals. The massive side of the ship was covered in small mounds of porites coral. It was easy to imagine that we were swimming over a large natural mound of reef up until we came across the exposed letters making up the ship's name on the bow.



Each wreck had its special cargo or artefacts. The *Fujikawa Maru* has an often-photographed telegraph and helm covered in red and orange sponge growth. The *Shinkoku Maru* was an oil carrier, some cabins still holding a moving ceiling of oil sluggishly swishing about in response to my rising air bubbles. A great dive is had on the *Nippo Maru* with three captured US Howitzers with tyres still intact pointing skywards and a tiny tank on deck that only a diminutive Japanese soldier could possibly enter and operate. Many of the ships still had human remains, such as the skull in the engine room of the *Kiyosumi Maru*. The bones of many sailors and soldiers were recovered from various wrecks and cremated in a Shinto ceremony in the mid 90s but skulls, femurs or entire skeletons still lie in many of the ships.

The *Fujikawa Maru* particularly interested me. In the huge cargo holds of the upright wreck are Zero fighters, wings and props removed and stored along with the fuselage for easy shipping. Machine gun bullets lay scattered about, the original timber storage boxes long since eaten away. Up in the bridge the ship's radios and engine room telegraph still stand.

As the 'Hailstone' operation was primarily airborne (ships and subs also being used in the attack) there are plane wrecks to explore as well. A Japanese Zero fighter lying upside-down in 6 metres still has shiny stainless hydraulic rams and impotent machine guns jutting from the wings. A 'Betty' bomber and 'Emily' float plane can also be explored, usually as a last dive of the day as they are relatively shallow.

After a full week diving the wrecks of Truk I came away with a new perspective on shipwrecks. No longer just dead boats, the war graves of Truk are time capsules preserving for us today a glimpse into part of the largest armed conflict (so far!) in the history of humankind. Hovering above the superstructure on the *Shinkoku Maru* on a long deco stop, the tall funnel festooned with soft corals and swarming with small reef fish, I tried to sum up my experiences. The only word I could come up with was 'waste' – a waste of human life, resources and technology. All those dead men on both sides of the conflict, whose sacrifice seems to have been ignored and the lessons so quickly forgotten. At least we as divers can both observe the history and experience the adventure that is Truk Lagoon.

Many visitors to Truk may not have dived for several months. Coupled with a long flight, dehydration and dive gear with sticky controls from that last hasty wash, it's smart to take it easy for the first day. A clever way to ease into or out of a 'full on' Truk wreck trip is to break the journey in Guam. The Guam Tropical Dive Station has some great dives to iron out any kinks and has the only dive in the world where you can touch both a WW I and WW II shipwreck at the same time. Reef diving has the spectacular Blue Hole or the fish-filled Crevise. If your timing's right, you can even enter the pumpkin carving competition! With a huge array of dive gear available you can fix, buy, or replace any piece of dive gear from a hose to a dive computer, fin strap to a BC.

There are a number of liveaboards in Truk. I spent most of my time on the 172' *Thorfinn* which has a history of its own. Initially a Norwegian whaler, it was converted into a dive travel boat and is now Truk's longest serving dive boat. Unlike other liveaboards in the area, *Thorfinn* actually helps the environment – a steam driven vessel that uses waste oil collected throughout Truk, Saipan and other The oil is burnt clean with no smoky emissions, providing both

engine power and facilities such as hot water for diver occupants.



Normally you'd want a liveboard to be anchored right on the dive site. However *Thorfinn* anchors away from the wrecks but close by, using fast 24' runabouts to ferry divers to the various wrecks. You can change dive sites at will, allowing for the appearance of day boats or other dive vessels on your intended wreck. Since the wrecks can and do silt up very quickly, you don't want another load of divers on your wreck. Secondly, maybe more importantly, there is no impact on the wrecks from dragged anchors. It appears that other liveaboards have caused considerable damage on many of the ships due to dragging or tangled anchors catching the superstructure.



Land-based resorts such as Truk Stop Hotel and Blue

Lagoon offer the advantage of more spacious accommodation and the chance to try various restaurants and bars. The disadvantage is the travel times to dive sites which can add up over a week or so. *Thorfinn* has the usual restrictions of a dive boat – smaller cabins, the same galley and bar every night and limited space to get away by yourself, but the positive side is unlimited diving (up to 5 dives per day) and a maximum travel time to your dive site of 10 minutes, though usually much less.