

the SECRETS of the HARDEEP wreck

+ ON THE BOTTOM OF THE GULF OF SIAM, ABOUT 150 KILOMETRES SOUTHEAST OF BANGKOK, IS THE WRECK OF A ONCE-BEAUTIFUL COASTAL SHIP, THE SS *SUDDHADIB* (PRONOUNCED SUD-DAR-DIP). FOR SIX DECADES IT'S PROVIDED A HAVEN FOR MULTITUDES OF MARINE LIFE. POPULAR WITH LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL SCUBA DIVERS, FEW VISITORS TO THE REMAINS OF THIS ONCE PROUD SHIP KNOW HER FASCINATING LIFE STORY.

As an Australian living in Bangkok for the past 12 years, and with good connections to the Thai military, I was able to research the wreck. I dug through the myths and stories, eventually confirming the identity of a ship previously misnamed the Hardeep. As I came across more information and actually met one of the wartime pilots involved in *Suddhadib's* sinking, I decided this story was worth telling. With help from dive buddies Brock Wright, Alex Beuchel and Ben Walker, I've ALSO created a DVD about her history, the scuba diving, and marine life.

Company decided to commission two new coastal ships. In honor of the royal family of Siam they named one the *Suddhadib* after one of the most popular and beautiful daughters of King Rama V. The East Asiatic shipping company built the *Suddhadib* for passenger and cargo operations, and it was typical of coastal cargo vessels of the day; about 70 metres long, 11 metres wide and 6 metres deep. Two cranes enabled loading and unloading in any port, while two boilers with a single yellow funnel drove a steam expansion engine with one propeller.

HISTORY OF THE WRECK

The steamship *Suddhadib* started her life in the dockyards of Hong Kong sometime during the year 1918. In Europe, World War I was in full swing but this war had little impact in Asia; business and trade were booming. The Bangkok-based East Asiatic

On arrival in Bangkok in 1919, a traditional Thai ceremony was held to bless the ship and Princess Suddhadib was presented with a silver replica. The steamship *Suddhadib* started her commercial career and for 20 years she carried people and cargo around the coasts of Southeast Asia. She was a

: PETER WALKER



Left - Princess Suddhadib of Siam
Below - The Steamship *Suddhadib* in Port (circa 1920)
Centre - The *Suddhadib's* massive crankshaft dominates the engine room
Below left - Part of the cargo of rubber seals reappearing out of the sand

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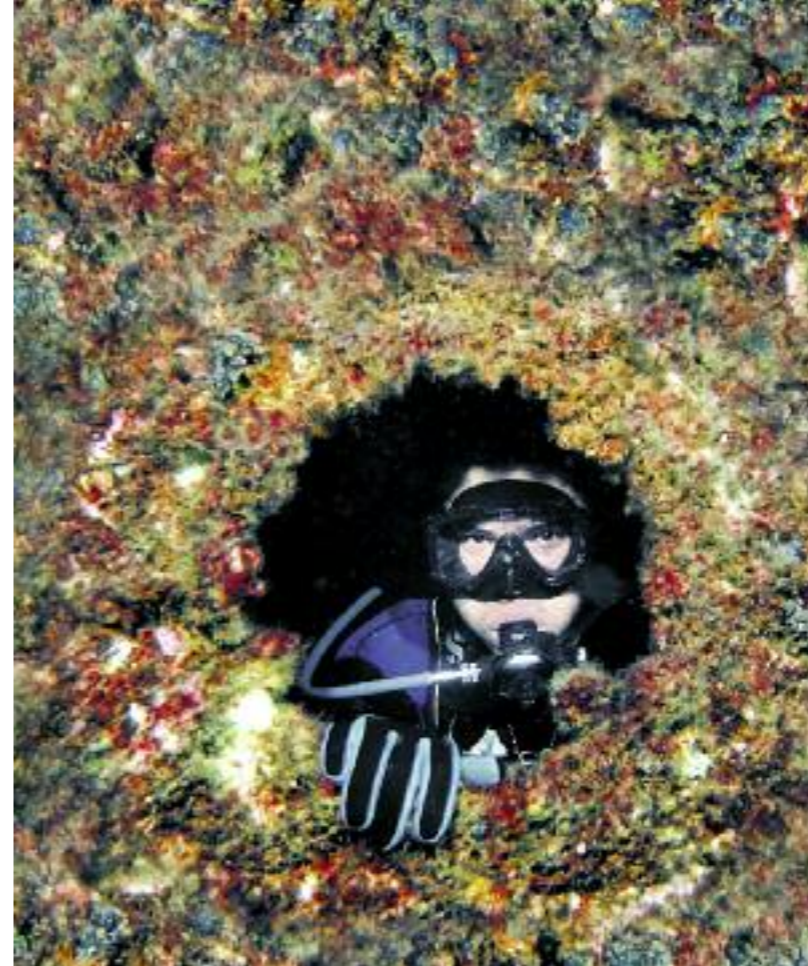


The *Suddhadib* on fire (taken from the RAF B24 that bombed her)

comfortable ship and has been described as ‘cheerful and chirpy’ by maritime enthusiasts.

During World War 2 the Thai government, rather than be invaded by the Japanese, was forced to declare war on England and America. In 1940, the Japanese-controlled government appropriated the *Suddhadib* to carry oil between Singapore and Bangkok. This fuel was vital to Japanese military campaigns in Burma and thrust the steamship *Suddhadib* into the war. By early 1945, the Allied forces had largely gained control of the airspace over Southeast Asia. British and American B24 Liberator bombers based near Calcutta in India were able to perform bombing raids on targets across Burma and Thailand. One focus of these raids was to prevent the Japanese supplying their troops fighting the Allies on the Burma front. This included bombing railway lines, storage depots and shipping. During this time, these same B24 Liberator bombers destroyed the infamous ‘Bridge over the River Kwai’ on the Death Railway.

At 6am on 1 June 1945, two squadrons of RAF Liberators left their Indian airfields to bomb the Port of Sattahip in Thailand. Wing Commander Lucian Ercolani led RAF159 squadron, with 14 B24 planes, each carrying five 1,000 pound bombs. After six hours flying through rough



monsoon skies, the planes reached Sattahip and found three ships at anchor – HTMS *Angthong*, HTMS *Thachin* and SS *Suddhadib*. With no fighter plane defenses and very few anti-aircraft guns, the bombers were able to carefully align with their targets and bomb from low altitude. RAF operation logs for the raid indicate all three ships were hit and sinking, though Thai naval records state HTMS *Thachin* survived the attack. The *Suddhadib* was severely damaged by a bomb exploding on her bow and an underwater explosion next to her hull. At least three of the bombs did not explode and still lie in the sand next to the sunken ship. As the ship was still loaded with drums of aviation fuel and a cargo of flammable rubber seals, the ship’s crew had to quickly abandon ship and swim to a nearby island. Still anchored, *Suddhadib* quickly sunk to the bottom and settled on her starboard side. Sixty years later, most of the people involved in the sinking of the *Suddhadib* have passed on. However, during our research we came across three of the pilots still alive: in England, Canada and Australia. Living in Adelaide, Flying Officer Max Mazengarb, now in his mid-80s, remembers well that day when, as a young man, he played a role in the sinking of the *Suddhadib*. Max provided us with a graphic description of that mission, describing monsoon flying, the challenges of low-level bombing and the relief of completing a mission and heading for home base.

DIVING THE SUDDHADIB

For the last six decades, the *Suddhadib* has been on the seabed, slowly collapsing, largely undisturbed, occasionally visited by scuba divers. A day’s diving on the *Suddhadib* usually starts at the small fishing port of Samaesarn. The journey out is pleasant through beautiful tropical islands. At 28 metres the *Suddhadib* is deep enough to be dangerous and is prone to strong currents that sweep the tides in through the surrounding islands. Unfortunately a number of scuba divers have died diving this wreck, mainly due to lack of experience, prompting local stories of ghosts inside the wreck.

The bow is dominated by the large forward cargo hold. Divers can enter here and swim through the wreck as far back as the ship’s boilers. Behind the boilers lies the engine room, dominated by the huge crankshaft and, behind that, the propeller shaft. Extreme care must be taken because the ship is slowly collapsing and sometimes a place that

was accessible on one dive may be a potential trap on the next. The stern cabin area interesting. Here divers can swim along the promenade deck where the first class passengers would have strolled 80 years ago. As the wreck continues to collapse, new items appear from time to time. Recently an intact dinner plate was found.

Out from the wreck about 20 metres across the sand at 30 metres is the unexploded bomb that’s lain there since 1945. Every diver’s pulse starts to race at the thought that one tap on the bomb’s nose could still shatter the sea for hundreds of metres around. Flying Officer Max Mazengarb explained that the bombs may not have exploded because they were dropped from such a low altitude. “But”, he warned, “my advice is to stay away from it!”.

SUDDHADIB MARINE LIFE

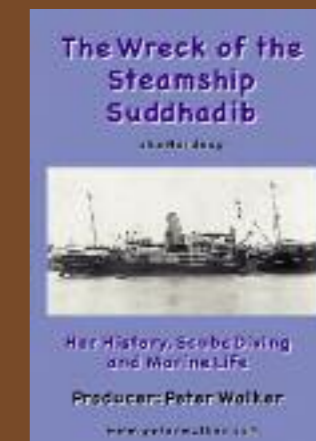
One of the great attractions of the *Suddhadib* is the range and quantity of marine life. Every surface is covered with life and in every nook and cranny myriads of sea creatures can be found. The external parts of the ship, constantly receiving light and a rich flow of plankton, are covered in marine life. Every square centimetre is covered in sponges, algae and corals, each silently battling for their space on the hull.

Not all the marine life here is friendly to divers. Sharp sea-urchin spines are everywhere. Scorpionfish and their poisonous spines are almost invisible. Some marine life, like the big marbled stingrays, use the hull to rest from the strong currents that sweep through with every tide. Others, such as corals and anemones, use the hull as a platform to get them up into the currents so they can feed on the plankton that streams past. Still other marine life use the *Suddhadib* as a hiding place. Schools of fish swoop around the wreck, diving inside for protection from predators.

The unexploded bomb, that potent reminder of the sinking of the *Suddhadib*, also forms part of the marine life habitat. Unaware of the terrible destructive force encapsulated in its steel exterior, a moray eel has established its home under the bomb. To me, that moray eel epitomizes this shipwreck and is a good place to end this story; the senseless destruction of war providing a habitat for nature to embrace – and a great place to scuba dive.



Large tiger cowrie shell with urchin



The video, now released on DVD, describes the steamship *Suddhadib*’s history, a day’s diving on the wreck and shows much of the marine life that can be found there. The DVD contains historical footage, soundtrack, narrative and, as a bonus for divers, an optional subtitle in the marine life section showing the names of all the marine

creatures. The DVD also contains an interview with Australian, Flying Officer Max Mazengarb, one of the pilots who flew the mission in 1945 that sank the *Suddhadib*. The DVD can be viewed online at www.peterwalker.com by clicking on the *Suddhadib* link or can be ordered from peter@peterwalker.com.

