

BURMA MARU



TIM LAWRENCE and friends were looking for deep wrecks off Thailand, but the tempting tip-off obtained through diligent research and whisky would eventually lead them south to Cambodia. Photographs by **MIKKO PAASI**



THE GHOSTLY SHAPE OF a stern appeared out of the gloom. And as we swam around the deck, the very first piece of machinery to reveal itself turned out to be the stern telegraph. A diver's dream!

Everywhere we looked beneath the thick coral growth we found evidence of life aboard a steamer in wartime.

We dropped briefly into the holds. Below-decks was crying out for investigation, but we would have to resist the temptation on this particular dive.

I started wondering what the Japanese crew had been thinking in their final moments.

Had they resigned themselves to their fate, or gone down battling to the end? It's the kind of reflection with which most technical divers will be familiar.

This wreck had lain hidden for 75 years, and now we could feel that its secrets were within reach of our dive-team. We were convinced that we had found the World War Two wreck we had been seeking.

The *Burma Maru* plied her trade around the coral-encrusted turquoise waters of South-east Asia. *Maru* was the title given to all Japanese cargo vessels of that time, and loosely translated means "round", possibly referring to return trips from and to the home port.

Built in Japan in 1917 by Kawasaki and owned by Nanyo Kaiun kk, she was a striking ship. Her mid-centre bridge, forward and aft holds and large superstructure contained cabins for fare-paying passengers.

She was 117m long with a 15m beam, and could be admired as beautiful or functional, depending on your point of view. Either way, the coral-encrusted wreck that now remains is a celebration of man's ongoing battle with the forces of nature.

BURMA MARU MET HER END violently, at 4.34am on 12 June, 1942. The Sargo-class submarine USS *Swordfish*, commanded by Lt-Cdr Chester Carl Smith, fired a salvo of torpedoes, missed, and then fired a second salvo. One of the torpedoes found its target, forward of the bridge.

Burma Maru stopped dead in the water, and over the next 12 minutes settled by the bow. So what *would* have gone through the minds of her captain and young crew, so far from home and



with little hope of rescue?

We had first become interested in the *Burma Maru* three years ago while we were searching war-record reports, initially for potential targets around our diving base of Koh Tao in Thailand.

We were struck by the freighter's classic shape, but were stymied by lack of information about the wreck.

The report gave the usual chart position, but these are so often inaccurate, given the limits of the tools available to a submarine commander during World War Two.

Above: One of the many brass portholes on the deck of the ship...

Below: ...and another marked for further mapping.

South of Thailand, Cambodia, because of its turbulent modern history, has been slow to take advantage of GPS and sounder technology, and fisherman's marks are thin on the ground there.

Then a chance meeting occurred between my dive-buddy Dave Polly and a Thai fisherman in Koh Chang. Oiled along by a bottle of Black Label, two marks emerged – close enough to the

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Burma Maru war-record report to raise the blood pressure. The game was afoot!

Unfortunately an injury then delayed our planned expedition by no fewer than two years, and when it resumed it had to proceed without Dave.

We were lucky, however, and struck a deal with one of his old students at a dive-shop in Cambodia.

We assembled a team. Leon Webber and I were from Davy Jones Tech and Mikko and Ivan from Koh Tao Tec Divers, and we were joined by Dennis Funk from the Dive Shop Cambodia.

Dennis and Ivan planned to dive open-circuit, so we also called in Oliver Zaiser, a closed-circuit rebreather diver based in Bangkok, to team up with Mikko the photographer.

We left Koh Tao on 16 February on a 16-hour drive to the Cambodian border, and after some delays managed to transfer all of our equipment across.

We then hired transport to get us to Sihanoukville on the Gulf of Thailand coast, and six hours later we were there.



The depths on the charts had indicated a need for helium. This would mitigate problems with narcosis, but mean that we would have to pre-order helium and oxygen and do the blending.

The rebreather team would use a combination of gases – trimix 15/35 on board to give us easy cell validation at the average depth of 57m (PO₂ 1.005) and a bottom bail-out of TMX 19/35, giving us a PO₂ of 1.27 at depth.

This would allow a narcosis loading of 28 or 34m, depending on requirements. The choice of gases also allowed us a smooth transition should a bail-out be necessary, because the gases would be matched by the unit at depth.

We would also carry a deco bail-out of 50% nitrox.

Although tired from the long journey, on arrival we busied ourselves blending gases before loading up the trucks and setting off for the harbour.

THE WEATHER FORECAST was good. We set out for the marks, arriving at 7am. I took over the boat to run the search, and within minutes the sounder was showing an image.

Going around the mark again we readied the shotline and deployed, but the sea gives up its mysteries grudgingly, and by the time Leon and Tim had descended the line to tie into the wreck, the current had moved the shot.

We ran a search pattern to find the wreck again, but were rewarded with a mud dive at 67m. Every technical diver knows that sinking feeling of having an hour's deco to complete with no reward.

We reshot the wreck, and Mikko and Oliver were up next, but the current beat them too. Now we had a slight problem – Ivan and Dennis were completing a course and were limited to depth.

So we reshot the wreck with extra



weight, and Ivan ran a reel on a bearing towards the mark.

Holding his depth, he managed to tie a line into the stern, but because of that depth and his available gas he paid the penalty and was unable to identify the type of ship we'd found.

I was up next with Leon, and with the advantage of helium, that was the point at which we were able to make out the distinct shape of the stern.

But it only was after Mikko and Oliver had returned with the footage that we could be certain that we had found the *Burma Maru*.



Above from top: Stern telegraph stand; a stern hatch to the living quarters.

Below, from left: Oliver Zaiser, Mikko Paasi, Tim Lawrence, Leon Webber, Ivan Karadzic and Dennis Funke.

This was confirmed on subsequent dives. During the third one we managed to reach the bridge, passing the cabins and funnel which had collapsed with the passage of time.

Everything was there – the helm, the main telegraph and the big brass voice communicator were all shouting out for our attention.

AS MY MIND STARTED DRIFTING once again to 1942, my thoughts were interrupted by the buzzing of a cell warning – probably water vapour, a diluent flush unable to move.

It was time to turn. Fortunately the cell caught up with the others and the alarm stopped. Left again with my thoughts, we drifted back to the stern, the current helping us along.

Colourful nature had brought life back to the former scene of destruction. At present the fate of the captain and crew remains a mystery, but because of the ship's isolated position we must presume that all hands were lost.

Our research continues, and further dives are in the planning. █

