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Attack on Coron Bay

Appeared in DIVER December 2016

The Japanese fleet frozen in time at this classic Philippines wreck-site provides a history lesson and also teems with life, say Michael Salvarezza & Christopher Weaver

THE DOWNLINE DISAPPEARED into the murky waters of Coron Bay in the Philippines, and with 8m visibility we had to trust that eventually it would lead us to our objective.

Hand over hand we descended into the warm waters of the bay, until our eyes finally began to discern the faint outline of the hulk of a sunken ship.

At first hazy and almost imperceptible, with every metre of additional depth it came into sharper focus. We were diving on the Akitsushima, a Japanese seaplane tender resting on its side in 36m.

Our descent took us to a spot near the stern, where we began our exploration of one of the vessels lost in the US Navy attack on a fleet of Japanese warships on 24 September, 1944.

Our eyes quickly adjusted to the light in the hazy water, and we recognised the remains of the ship's crane lying in the sand. It was used to lift seaplanes from the water onto the deck; today, it is home to schools of fish seeking shelter from predators.

Resting alongside it is a three-barrelled anti-aircraft gun and projectile, appearing as if they were poised to resume the battle that sank them all those years ago.

We were only a few minutes into our dive and already enthralled.

The Akitsushima was hit near the stern and an opening into the bowels of the wreck, evidence of the damage that caused her to sink within minutes of being hit, invited us inside. Leaving the sunlit world of Coron Bay, we entered the ghostly confines of the sunken ship.

Our mix of 28% nitrox helped ward off the effects of narcosis as we pushed deeper into the mangled insides of the wreck, but the ship's disorienting position on the bottom and the internal damage from the attack presents challenges to navigating these passageways.

We quickly made our way through hazardous wreckage, narrow corridors and cargo holds before emerging near an opening close to the bow. Rising to the top of the wreck, we slowly rode the slight tidal current back to the upline, where we began our ascent.

Later, as our faces broke the surface to be greeted by the mid-morning Philippines sun, we smiled broadly to each other... our exploration of the shipwrecks of Coron Bay was on!

IN WORLD WAR TWO, the Philippines archipelago was the site of several fierce battles between US and Japanese forces. During the Battle of the Philippines in 1941 and 1942, Japan invaded Luzon from the north and attacked Manila from the land. US and Filipino troops, led by General MacArthur, retreated to the Bataan Peninsula. The fall of Bataan, on 9 April, 1942, signalled the victory of Japan in Manila and the northern Philippines. The Bataan Death March is an indelible icon of the brutality of this period of the war.



Michael Salvarezza explores the Okikawa prison

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Artillery shell on the Akitsushima



remains of an anti-aircraft gun on the Akitsushima



lionfish on the Olympia Maru



Long-beaked coralfish on the Tere Kaze Maru



The Olympia Maru - Christopher Weaver explores the shadowy remains



The Olympia Maru - striped catfish seek shelter alongside the wreckage



The Olympia Maru - barrels



The Kaogyu Maru - exploring the interior of the wreck



The Kaogyu Maru - part of the cargo



The Kaogyu Maru - crocodilefish



The Kaogyu Maru - remains of an old bulldozer inside the wreck



The Okikawa Maru - fish escaping from the interior



The Okikawa Maru - photographing marine life on the sides of the wreck



The Tere Kaze Maru has become a living reef 1



The Tere Kaze Maru has become a living reef 2



The Tere Kaze Maru has become a living reef 3



The Tere Kaze Maru has become a living reef 4



Willan's Chromodoris



As American forces battled to liberate the Philippines, the Battle of the Philippine Sea took place between 19-20 June, 1944, followed by the Battle of Leyte Gulf that October. Between these two battles, the US Navy launched a strike force of fighters and bombers to attack a Japanese supply fleet of up to 24 ships at anchor in Coron Bay and around nearby Busuanga Island on 24 September. This was a surprise aerial attack by the US Third Fleet, under the command of Admiral "Bull" Halsey aboard the battleship USS New Jersey. Vice-Admiral Mitscher, commanding Task Force 38 from the aircraft-carrier USS Lexington, provided tactical control of the attack.

Ninety-six Grumman F6F Hellcat fighter-escorts and 24 Curtiss SB2C Helldiver dive-bombers took off from their positions 340 miles away that morning and ultimately surprised the Japanese fleet at Coron. In a devastating aerial assault, the US Navy sent these ships to the bottom of the bay.

One victim was the Olympia Maru, a freighter that sits upright at 30m. Descending into the cargo holds, divers come across piles of large barrel drums covered in silt and strewn across the bottom. Swim through these silent passageways and you can imagine the chaos of the sinking that caused these drums to be tossed about so violently.

Outside, huge schools of silversides glide over the wreckage and divers often encounter schools of batfish swimming in and around it. Resting in disguise on the deck are venomous stonefish, a living warning against touching anything.

THE KAOGYO MARU lies on its starboard side in 34m and offers divers swim-throughs into all six of its cargo holds and into the engine-room and bridge area. In the second hold, a small bulldozer is readily apparent, along with a pile of cement bags that tumbled chaotically as the ship sank.

The Kaogyo is also home to brilliant soft corals that adorn the top of the wreck at 22m. It would be easy to lose focus on the wreck itself as you swim alongside clouds of small reef fish, and observe predatory lionfish lying in wait among the wreckage and corals.

Just before nine that morning dive-bombers attacked the Okikawa Maru. The first two groups simply strafed the Japanese tanker before heading for the Akitsushima Maru, anchored nearby. But 15 minutes later they scored numerous direct hits on the ship, which began to sink. Official records are unclear, but it has been reported that three gunners and five or six sailors were killed in the attack.

Okikawa Maru did not sink completely – the forecastle remained afloat and burning until 9 October, when another US air group sent it to the bottom in a final attack.

Today, the vessel lies upright in 26m with its main deck reachable between 10 and 16m. The bow section is crumpled and pointing upwards from the main wreckage. Perhaps the most interesting wreck in Coron, Okikawa Maru offers both a plethora of colourful marine life and fascinating opportunities for wreck penetration and exploration.

You can traverse the propeller shaft from outside the ship all the way through to the engine-room, and also explore the ship's prison. Examining the rusting bars of the jail-cell sparks thoughts of what life was like aboard these vessels.

OTHER SHIPWRECKS IN THE area also invite wreck-divers to explore their broken bones and shattered keels. The Teru Kaze Maru is a gunboat or submarine-hunter that lies in very shallow water on the east side of Tangat Island. Starting in only 3m and dropping to 22, it's as good for snorkellers as divers. For divers with deep diving experience, the Irako, a Japanese refrigeration ship that lies in 43m at the mouth of the bay, often boasts the best visibility of the Coron wrecks and is one of the most picturesque shipwrecks in the area.

There are several other wrecks the identity of which is still unknown. These ships add to the mystery of the place... what is their story and how did they eventually sink?

The waters of Coron Bay are relatively protected but the passages between the islands are subject to swift currents during tidal exchanges, so dives should be planned accordingly.

Also, it often comes as a surprise to divers visiting the Coron area for the first time to find that the waters are somewhat murky and silty.

Visibility can exceed 30m on good days but drop to only a few feet on bad days. Average visibility on the wrecks is generally 6-9m. To experience them in safety and comfort, divers should have at least Advanced OWD certification and, before doing penetrations, make sure they have Wreck Diver certification and proper experience.

As we concluded our trip, we sat on the deck of the Big Beth, the liveaboard operated by the Marco Vincent Dive Resort in Puerto Galera, and marvelled at the canopy of brilliant stars that draped the sky. We were headed to Apo Reef, and with no artificial light sources they appeared numerous and brilliant.

They also seemed to extend right into the water, where flashes of bioluminescent light mimicked the starlight and created a continuum between waves and sky.

This mesmerising cathedral of lights reminded us of how we are all connected in this world – to each other, to our past and to our future. The history that lies beneath the waves in Coron Bay is just part of the tapestry of human experience.



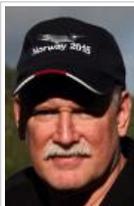
a pair of anemonefish make their home on the deck of an old freighter



a jellyfish floats past



baitfish



Michael Salvarezza



Christopher Weaver

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FACTFILE

GETTING THERE: Fly to Manila and on to Coron or transfer to Puerto Galera.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION: Marco Vincent Dive Resort in Puerto Galera offers multi-day liveaboard safaris to Coron on Big Beth, www.marcovincent.com

WHEN TO GO: Wet season May-October, dry season November-April. April and May are the warmest, most humid months, December and January the coolest. Typhoons can threaten from July-October.

CURRENCY: Philippines peso, US dollars accepted.

PRICES: Marco Vincent six-night dive safaris to Coron and Apo Reef cost US \$2085pp. Seven nights' full-board at the resort with diving costs \$1785pp.

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