

Lament of the Lagarto

Deep in the Gulf of Thailand, the USS Lagarto submarine sits in quiet testament to those that have passed

By Ayesha Cantrell

BEING DEEP below the surface with your life dependant on the equipment that you carry is the norm for divers, but imagine now that your survival is at the mercy of fate too. Swap your relative freedom for the confines of a submarine and experience the deep boom of depth charges exploding around your metal chamber. Feel the detonations vibrate through the metal as terrifying as thunder to a small child. The moment of impact trailed by a drenched dark silence as power fails and a dull thud announces your paralysis upon the ocean bed. The lucky submariners were killed instantly; the unlucky may well endure for a few more terrible hours. Asphyxiation as the oxygen runs out, drowning as the water seeps in or choking on chlorine gas as salt water drenches the massive batteries are the final trials of WWII submariner. Many US submarines never returned, some remain missing, while others were blown to pieces. In stark contrast, the Balao class submarine USS Lagarto lies in pristine condition in 72m of clear warm water in the Gulf of Thailand.

Shipwrecks have always mesmerised me but a submarine, belonging underwater, seems somehow different, like observing an animal in its true habitat. Or possibly it's the opportunity to peek behind the veil of secrecy that all submarines exude. Either way this was going to be no ordinary wreck dive.

Getting to the wreck site is an overnight cruise from Koh Tao aboard MV Trident whose owners were also the discoverers of the wreck. Jamie Macleod was the first to catch a glimpse of the USS Lagarto, ending the 60-year mystery of the missing submarine. After its rediscovery, each dive revealed new information as to

the USS Lagarto's final moments. Over dinner Jamie explains that she went down fighting, a fact that has become a source of pride amongst the relatives of the deceased.

The next morning dawns clear and calm. Gasses are checked, equipment tested and plans reviewed. With my buddy, Wilco, I step off the deck into the crystal blue water. The splash of our entry seems at odds with the calm ocean. We quietly pull ourselves to the down line in deference to the war grave we are about to visit. Seventy metres is a long way to travel but very quickly we notice huge schools of jacks circling, some black, some silver, displaying typical mating colours. Massive barracuda stalk just within visibility range. Below, the unmistakable shape of periscope shears appears through the thermocline, sending unforgettable shivers down my spine.

The conning tower is encrusted in growth yet is fully intact. Even the ravages of fishing nets have left the instrumentation exactly as it would have been. The target data transmitter, a binocular-like tool used to transmit coordinates to the torpedo room, sits to the right of the sight and telegraph. I can almost see the intense young sailor frantically shouting directions and directing the attack. With limited bottom time we have restricted this dive to a tour of the conning tower and a trip to the area around the forward gun. Cloaked in a blurry thermocline, this destructive machine appears as if through smoke from a battle. The guns' silence is eerie, pointing as if ready to fire and at odds with the fusiliers darting around the fearsome barrel.



“IT’S ALMOST LIKE SOMEONE PUT FLOWERS ON A GRAVE”

Dropping over the port side of the deck we see the only damage to this fully intact upright wreck, undoubtedly caused by a depth charge. The fatal blow was let loose from the Japanese destroyer Hatsutaka during the Lagarto's attack on a Japanese convoy. The sight of the outer hull, torn like paper, demonstrates the rage of battle like nothing else I have ever seen.

Our time is up and we return to the con where a “star spangled banner” was raised during a memorial. John and Beth, the grandchildren of Signalman First Class William T. Mabin, who served on the Lagarto's final patrol, attended this memorial. Upon being shown video footage of the wreck Beth commented: “With all the fish and the coral covering the Lagarto, it’s almost like someone put flowers on a grave.” The submerged flag waves with the oceans movement, and I take a moment to reflect before starting our long ascent to the surface.

Our next dive was planned to progress our exploration forward towards the bow, to start reading the story of her final battle written in her metal remains. Arrival at the conning tower the second time is still overwhelming and it’s difficult not to tarry and gaze in awe on the way to the bow. Curious bannerfish follow us and white soft coral bushes sprout from where the teak deck would once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger twin tanks. Turning, I notice his torchlight circling the dome-shaped lid of the escape hatch. It’s hard not to hear hammering and voices from within, and in the silence I know Wilco is listening too.

I’m taken by surprise when we reach the bow quickly. Dropping over the side, the sight of the towering bow is nothing short of awesome. This is one of the deepest points; standing on the sand at 72m looking up you will be both dwarfed and humbled. Submerge holes line the sides of the bow and allow light to filter though the wreck and look spectral and engaging. Close by are the torpedo tube doors. After firing the door should close, but one remains open. This suggests that a torpedo was fired in her final moments, giving weight to the theory that the crew fought to the end. The huge dive planes protrude from the sides of the wreck like whale fins and are draped in fishing nets made colourful by coral growth. Their slanted positioning suggests a steep dive was in progress.

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The final piece of the puzzle fits into place on our subsequent dives, where we explore sternwards. On the longer swim to the propellers there is much to see and the bushes of white coral seem even more prolific than towards the bow. The destructive rear gun is approached through a veritable forest of coral and sits neatly in an opening, as if the ocean respects its power. The gun is poignantly decorated with a single colourful feather star. I'm startled when a large red snapper darts out from behind the gun, breaking the spell. A once shiny plaque recently left by US Navy divers, who officially confirmed identification, is attached to a capstan. Dropping over the stern, it was the rudder I was interested to see. Positioned hard to port, it confirms along with the dive planes, that the submarine was in a classic evasive manoeuvre at its last. The only other must-see feature on any wreck dive are the propellers, and due to the classic tapering shape of the stern, you can actually swim out beneath the wreck and in between them. This is a tremendous feeling; no other swim-through will be quite the same. The massive screws sit on each side of the submarine, making Wilcos 6ft frame seem tiny in comparison.

Our final return to the con comes all too quickly, but it reminds me that I'm lucky to have this opportunity. Few divers are trained to this depth and due to the sites location fewer still will ever be fortunate enough to visit. The site is classed as a war grave and there are no plans for salvage. I leave with the hope of someday returning, content that the Lagarto has and will continue to be treated with the respect that she deserves. [SDAA](#)

The life of any submariner in WWII was a hard one. The constant humidity, cramped living conditions and three rotating watches combined for a psychological and physical strain endurable only by the well-trained elite. However, the silent terror that their vessels constantly represented to the enemy was not only crucial but also certainly deadly. Submariners made up just 2 percent of US Navy personnel yet they were responsible for the sinking of 55 percent of Japanese tonnage. Success was at a cost though, as these fearless men worked in unforgiving circumstances and their machines of stealth could quickly become their coffin. Proof of the risk a submariner endured is illustrated to this day, as enrolment in the corps remains voluntary.

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