

## Wreck-Diving Opportunities in Subic Bay, Philippines

# The Wreck of the USS New York

By Dave Ross



Photo #: NH 50012 USS NEW YORK

**W**here in the world can you find a United States Navy flagship in twenty-seven meters of thirty-degree-Celsius water, just five minutes from the end of an international airport runway?

Intrigued? Quite rightly so. The heavy cruiser originally named the USS New York is the centerpiece of a collection of fascinating wrecks strewn around the bottom of the former US naval base of Subic Bay, Olongapo City, in the Philippines. Though moderately shallow, she provides divers with true technical diving opportunities, and, in the minds of many,

overshadows other Subic wrecks that deserve exploration.

It was in 1992 that the departing Americans delivered their base at Subic, previously off-limits to civilian divers, back into Philippine hands. My own experience in the area dates back to 1995, when I was working as a recreational instructor for one of the original dive shops that entrepreneurial individuals had begun to establish around Olongapo. During my time there, I became familiar with wrecks ranging in date from 1898 to World War II.

The San Quinten was the earliest, scuttled off Grande Island in sixteen meters of water in an effort to block port access. Although largely broken up, it is still very much recognizable as a steamship. Being out in the cleanest water, this wreck is the place to head for if you are interested in traditional reef life. Farther inside the bay lies an upright LST in thirty-three meters of water. Though its stern superstructure is torn apart, it is nonetheless alive with small barracuda.

An offshoot of Subic, Ilanin Bay is home to a freighter of ambiguous origin named El Capitan; it is some ninety meters long and rests, port side down, in five to twenty meters of water. Today, it serves as a beautiful wreck for penetration training. Nearby, at a depth of about twenty-five meters, lie a Japanese patrol boat and a very photogenic American LCU (Landing Craft Utility). Farther inside the bay lie two Japanese freighters: the Seian Maru and the Oryoku Maru. At a depth of twenty-seven meters, the Seian Maru is dived less often, as it is located in one of the siltiest parts of the port. However, for those who are comfortable navigating in poor conditions, this wreck provides opportunities for divers to observe the shadows of large marine life looming in her holds. The Oryoku Maru was sunk in eighteen meters of water and, being a navigational hazard, was later wire-dragged; she is now a debris field, albeit a very-much-alive one. The Oryoku Maru was a "Hell Ship," an unmarked freighter used by the Japanese during World War II to move POWs to areas where they could not be liberated by the advancing Allies and where

they could be used as slave labor. While conveying 1,619 Allied POWs from Manila, the unmarked vessel was targeted and torpedoed by American aircraft from the USS Hornet. More than three hundred POWs lost their lives as a result of this attack. Most recent wrecks in the area came after my time, including a FedEx plane (this is their Southeast Asian hub), which overshot the runway and belly-flopped into the water, and the discovery of the Nikko Maru at fifty-four meters.

But let us return to our flagship. Armored Cruiser CA-2 was authorized by Congress in 1888, launched in 1891, and commissioned in August 1893 in Philadelphia as the fourth USS New York. One hundred and fifteen meters long by twenty meters in the beam, this heavily armored vessel displaced a solid 8,150 tons. She had a compliment of forty officers and 516 enlisted men; her four triple-expansion engines, yielding seventeen thousand horsepower, could power her along at twenty-one knots; and she had an endurance of five thousand nautical miles at a speed of ten knots. Her impressive main armament of eight-inch fore and aft turrets are still in place today.

Her naval career spanned the globe, starting in 1894 in the South Atlantic Squadron, transferring to the North Atlantic during the summer, and then to European waters. With the onset of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the USS New York became the flagship of Admiral Sampson in Cuba. She was credited with actions against eleven Spanish ships during the war, in spite of being temporarily off-station for the climactic Battle of Santiago—where the fate of the Spanish fleet was sealed—only returning in time to participate in the battle's closing stages.

Following other Latin American tours, she was dispatched to Cavite, Philippines, to become the flagship of the Asiatic fleet. There, she visited Yokohama, Hong Kong and Vladivostok, and also participated in actions against Filipino insurgents. She then returned to duties as flagship of the Pacific Squadron in 1904, and was decommissioned for overhaul the next year. After a spell on reserve, she was back in full commission in 1910, bound for Manila. By 1911, she was renamed USS Saratoga,

releasing her name to a newer battleship, and in 1917 she was back in the Atlantic as the USS Rochester, performing convoy escort duties. She remained in the Atlantic during the post-war years, protecting American interests in Nicaragua and Haiti. She returned to the Asiatic Fleet by 1932, where she was to see out her days, being decommissioned in Cavite and then moored in Olongapo shipyard in 1933, where she spent eight years serving as an auxiliary power plant and machine shop. The USS Rochester was finally scuttled in Subic, on Christmas 1941, to prevent her capture by the advancing Imperial Japanese Forces.

Diving in Subic Bay is generally easy. If there is a downside, it would be low visibility during wet weather. Nonetheless, one must bear in mind that this is a harbor, after all, and that a range of five to as much as twenty meters of visibility is pretty reasonable. The USS New York lies well inside the bay and is therefore sheltered; access requires one to get permission to dive in windows between shipping traffic. A mooring is tethered at a depth of about eighteen meters above her stern turret. She lies on her port side with a seabed depth of twenty-seven to twenty-eight meters; she is buried almost to her centerline by natural settling and siltation following the catastrophic eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991.

Touching down on the wreck, one can swim along the flat expanse of the encrusted, and very picturesque, hull toward the bow, peering through portholes along the way. Toward the foreship is an area of significant damage to the hull and gun and berth decks. In the past this had puzzled me. With so much starboard side damage, why had the ship listed and sunk on her port? The answer lies with Harbor Clearance Unit One, who, during the Vietnam War, was charged with leveling the wreck. Because the ship proved far too solid to be completely destroyed, they apparently settled for lowering the profile of the bow enough to prevent a shipping hazard.



Photo #: NH 85672 NEW YORK 8" gun  
**The USS New York's eight-inch gun**

In doing this, they actually did us a great favor, as the blast hole is now a prime entrance into the ship's interior.

The USS New York was the site of my own, and several friends', formative technical wreck-diving experiences some years ago. As such, the shipwreck stays in my mind as one of those landmarks where our diving took a leap forward. We'd undergone training in technique on El Capitan, and this was the practical application. Interior exploration of the ship runs the full gamut from a relatively straightforward swim-through of the gun deck, with large, reassuring openings to open water, to portside engine room dives six meters below seabed depth, which are absolutely not for the nervous.

The training and the numerous experience dives we undertook helped us gain experience and cultivate our skills. Transitioning from the easy realm of the open water technical diver to an overhead environment had its humbling moments: something akin to rolling into a Fundamentals course thinking you're all squared away, and then seeing the video... "Is that me...?" Psychologically, too, the dives felt demanding to begin with. Developing confidence in a newly acquired skill set takes time. From years of supervising others, I had acquired a finely tuned ability to monitor fellow divers' comfort

and stress levels. Now, for the first time in a long while, I had to turn those evaluations upon myself as much as I did on my buddies. Realizing that open-water decompression ceiling doesn't feel remotely as committed as solid steel overhead, and the sensations associated with passing an unexpected and particularly restricted area, silting it, and then becoming preoccupied with how the exit would be, added a new mental angle. These were some of the few times in the water I'd ever felt enough was enough, that I wasn't concentrating fully on important things because of it, and that it was time to thumb the dive.

Necessarily, though, team skills were built and capabilities increased. The confidence gained with growing adept at something as straightforward as intelligent line placement was remarkable, and during the course of several visits, we poked into just about every part of the ship through which it is still possible for a human being to pass. The center of this vessel is outstanding to explore: large in area, but internally very complex and restricted. Engine room access is gained by dropping through the bomb hole in the bow, facing toward the stern and locating a hatchway that leads to a tunnel through an area of coal bunkers. Somewhat inside of this is another hatch (leading toward port), where a squeeze past a large diameter pipe leads to the engine rooms proper, and to passages that allow a diver to explore all the way to either exit amidships, behind the stern turret, or to the tail of the ship, where the starboard propeller shaft—supported on huge A-frames—can be found piercing through the curved hull.

This dive to the propeller shafts became a favorite. Final entry to the compartment is via a low squeeze through a doorway, with one's chest in the silt. The first diver can see clear water through the opening, but the number-two man will only enjoy a light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel type experience. Initially blacked out by silt, one emerges into the crystal-clear, but inky-black, water of a compartment that conveys a sense of both discovery and utter privacy. The number of divers visiting this place in a year probably can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Time spent here is always brief: After a couple of minutes to soak up the

atmosphere, bubbles are already bringing down snowflakes of rust and shutting down the visibility. At this point, it's time to go to touch contact and commence the long exit.

Though over the years we have seen some structural collapse inside the stern, the USS New York is likely to stand head and shoulders above the average wreck dive for years to come. She is historic, challenging, easily accessible and actually considerably underused as a technical dive site. To dive her in the manner to which those reading *Quest* would be accustomed requires a little more than just dropping in at the local dive shop, but Puerto Galera-based divers make relatively regular trips and would be happy to offer current advice. Send a message to Dave Ross, who'll try to help out.

#### The stern of the USS New York



Photo #: NH 100315 NEW YORK stern

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