WAR MACHINES
Inside the wrecks of Coron Bay

Packed into one small bay in the Philippines is one of the most impressive collections of Second World War wrecks in the world. John Nightingale offers his guide to the area’s best penetration dives.

ROUND WINDOW: a school of jacks passes by a porthole on the Irako. All photography by John Nightingale.
On 24 September 1944, a squadron of 24 Helldiver bombers burst out of the sky above Coron Bay in the Philippines, located the Japanese supply fleet hiding among the islands below, and proceeded to blow it apart. The dive bombers, escorted by 96 Hellcat fighters – some of which were also carrying bombs – had just 15 minutes to sink as many ships as possible before their fuel would get too low for them to complete the 340-mile return journey to their aircraft carrier. The attack was ruthlessly successful, and left a legacy that wouldn’t be discovered until recreational diving came to this remote part of the Philippines.

Coron Bay has the best wreck diving in Southeast Asia, all packed into one relatively small area. There is nothing quite like the feeling of standing on a jetty, knowing that you have at least half a dozen huge wartime vessels lying within a short boat ride. Each wreck has its own special characteristics, but on the whole they are big, mostly intact, within reasonable diving depth and full of amazing artefacts.

If you prefer to explore the exterior of shipwrecks, these are ideal. The decks are wonderfully encrusted with coral and swarming with fish life. There are deckhouses, masts, cranes and lookout perches. The hulls have rows of portholes to give glimpses into the cabins. There are still anti-aircraft guns in place and huge circular gun mounts. Massive holds yawn beneath you, and in places the deck has been peeled back by the bombs, allowing you to float safely down into the belly of the ship.

If penetrating deep into wrecks is your passion, then Coron really is heaven on a stick. Every dive at Coron left me wanting more, but I had my favourites – and as far as I am concerned, the Irako has the most to offer wreck divers. At 147m long and 19m wide, it is a sizeable wreck. It sits virtually upright on the sea bed at 43m, with the deck around the 30m mark.

The attack began within less than a day of their arrival at Coron Bay, Vice Admiral Mitscher, on board the aircraft carrier USS Lexington, ordered the 120 planes into the air and they set off to the very limit of their range. The first targets the Helldivers took on were the biggest – the Akitsushima, which carried sea planes and was heavily armed, and the Okikawa Maru, a 170m-long oil tanker. In no time, the Akitsushima was sunk and the Okikawa Maru fatally damaged. Soon after, the Olympia Maru and the Kogyo Maru were under attack, and both went down with the loss of many lives. The Iraku, a provision ship, went down with flak guns blazing, and even the army auxiliary supply ship Kyokuzan Maru – hiding on the other side of Busuanga Island – was sunk before the attackers finally had to head off.

The Irako

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Because of the depth and the size of this wreck, it took many dives for me to begin to really find my bearings. One good way in was through the wheelhouse, past the wheel and into a big hold. From there, we set off through a maze of corridors and gangways. The Irako took such a pounding that some of the decks actually got compressed and are now only about a metre and a half in height.

As we made our way through, I saw doorways into rooms with strange items of machinery and ladders leading off in different directions – all potential routes for the next dive. The galley still had its huge rice cauldrons and other kitchen utensils, and when we entered the machine shop, there were pillar drills and lots of wiring hanging everywhere. Deep inside, we came across a bicycle leaning against the cabin wall.

Coming back out on deck and into the light was always brilliant, as we’d invariably be greeted by a huge shoal of jacks that poured around the sides of the vessel and filled the blue above. Then it would be time to ascend up a thick mast with big crosstrees and the crow’s nest on top covered in huge barrel sponges.
As we ascended up the vertical deck, my deck, with circular gun mounts bolted to it. Another anti-aircraft gun hanging from the spot munitions lying around, and there is the guns. It still had shells in it. For raising the shells onto the deck to feed the second floor, we passed a bank of what dials. Backtracking through a small hole into a room, with panels covered in gauges and narrow descent took us into the control. Sheer ferocity of the bombardment. Its twisted metal bearing testament to the operated the crane. From there, you impressive-looking machinery that hole in the hull and get in among the nearby, you can penetrate through a come across an anti-aircraft gun – across the sand.

If you keep your eyes open, you start to swim around the crane, you come across an anti-aircraft gun - nearly, you can penetrate through a hole in the hull and get in among the impressive-looking machinery that operated the crane. From there, you move into the most badly damaged area, its twisted metal bearing testament to the sheer ferocity of the bombardment.

We carried on through the engine room between the two huge engines, and then a narrow descent took us into the control room, with panels covered in gauges and dials. Backtracking through a small hole into the second floor, we passed a bank of what looked like giant corkscrews - the machinery for raising the shells onto the deck to feed the guns. It still had shells in it.

If you keep your eyes open, you start to spot munitions lying around, and there is another anti-aircraft gun hanging from the deck, with circular gun mounts bolted to it. As we ascended up the vertical deck, my buddy caught a reflection from his torch inside a deck winch drum and looked inside to find a chronometer that had been lying there undisturbed for the past 65 years.

**THE AKITSUSHIMA**

When you dive on the Akitsushima, you are left in no doubt that you are on a ship of war. At 18m long and 16m wide, she was a large, well-armed battleship designed to carry seaplanes.

Today, the wreck lies on its port side 25m, with the crane that was used to lift the planes now stretching out across the sand.

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**THE OLYMPIA MARU**

For a long time, this wreck had not been identified, and was often called the Tangat wreck. It lies very close to Sangat Island, sitting upright in 30m of water, and is 122m long and 17m wide. Because of its comparatively shallow depth, this is a good wreck to start with. It is easy to navigate around the main deck as there are lots of masts and open cargo bays that make for an easy entry into the ship.

We dived from the rear hold, through a small gap and into the second hold. Here we came across what appeared to be a prison cell, before we squeezed through into the engine room and past the boilers with their exposed tubes. A number of tight swim-throughs led us out past piles of barrels into a deckhouse. I particularly remember this wreck for the resident marine life: there were bright orange bushes of black coral, crimson sponges, lots of big puffers complete with remoras, and scorpionfish nestled along the railroad. It makes a wonderfully atmospheric night dive, with sleeping fish and turtles tucked in all over the place.