



Diving into Coron

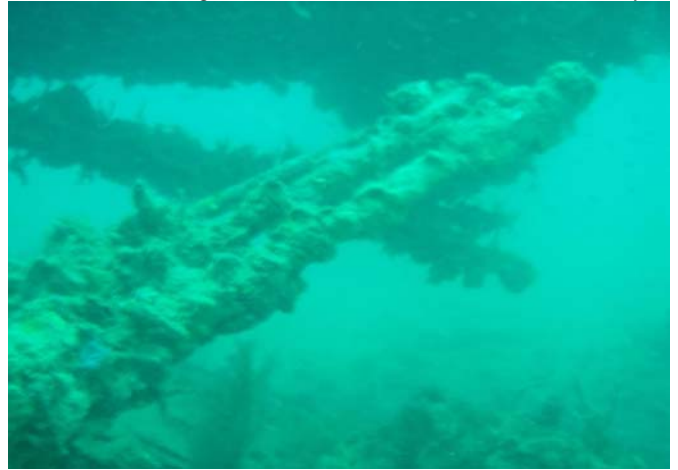


Watching the fins in front of me disappear into the blackness, I slowly maneuvered myself in line with the opening into which my brother had just slipped. I took in the scene above me one last time before sticking my head into the stern of the ship. The *Taiei Maru* towered above me, its three-story rudder was turned hard to port and the railing around the stern of the ship reached towards the air above the South China Sea as if it were clawing its way back to the warm water's surface. I was preparing to penetrate the propeller shaft of this Japanese freighter in 140 feet of seawater. It would be a long, tight penetration that would demand a complete mastery of precise buoyancy, silt-friendly kicking and an almost Zen-like mental state. Shining my light into the blackness, I lightly flicked my fins outward and inched my body into the opening. I could feel my double tanks lightly brush against the encrusted metal of the wreck and pulled in my reels that were clipped to my hip D-rings as I worked my way into the hole. Inside of the ship, the shaft was only 4 feet tall and 5 feet wide. Several inches of silted sand and dirt covered the floor of the shaft and I concentrated on my frog kicking to prevent silting out the visibility while I floated towards the next bearing support. There was no turning back now. Even in the event of a complete silt-out, we had to continue on to the boilers that were over 100 feet away. We were in a steel cave that had resided at the bottom of the ocean for over sixty years, with hanging cables and sharp metal edges beckoning us to stay forever. While we floated along, I was surprisingly relaxed and comfortable in the claustrophobic environment - a result of our training over the past year. Regardless of the gravity and seriousness of the situation, I found myself giggling like a kid on a playground. Gradually, the bluish green glow of open water came into view and I swam out to meet my dive buddies, who were all grinning from ear to ear. Looking at my computer, I was pleased to see that we only had a few minutes of hang time accrued so we signaled that it was time to explore the upper deck of the wreck before repaying our decompression debt on the buoy line. We had been planning this trip to the Philippine Islands for the last 8 months and it was intoxicating to finally be on the wrecks of Coron Bay.



Above: The railing of the Taiei Maru as it clawing its way back to the surface.

Below: Anti-Aircraft guns on the Akitsushima still stand at the ready.



Above: The eroded cliffs of Coron Bay have witnessed the entire spectrum of human events throughout the last century **Opposite:** Erie windows frame the control room of the Okikawa Maru. **Inset Right:** Divers penetrate the propeller shaft of the Taiei Maru. **Inset Left:** A diver prepares to enter a bomb hole in the Akitsushima

Getting to Coron Bay

Getting to Coron Bay is easier than you may think. We emailed Gunter ahead of time to reserve space and dives at Discovery Divers and then booked our flight to Manila on the internet. There are some amazingly cheap flights out there with the Chinese and Taiwanese airlines and there were no problems for a bunch of English-only speakers throughout the trip. There are two options to Coron – Take the Superferry directly into Coron Bay or book the 1 hour flight into Busuanga and take the bus to the other side of the island (an adventure that is highly recommended). Bag weight was limited to 70 pounds on our luggage and we had to wait for a couple of bags in Coron since the small plane filled with luggage very quickly. Gunter picked us up at the pier and we were at the resort in a matter of minutes. We can't say enough about how friendly the locals were. Everywhere we went, they talked with us and wanted to say Mabuhay. Food, lodging and beer were extremely cheap as the US Dollar was trading at 56 pesos. A room in town will set you back \$20 US and a San Miguel will cost you a quarter. Our return trip was on the Superferry, which we decided was built for a different demographic since we would stand up in the Disco and lift the ceiling tiles with the tops of our heads. When you take the ferry, opt for the private cabins – this is not a place to cut corners, as the trip is an overnight one. It serves as a perfect surface interval before the long flight and the crowd in the Disco is always ready to help you burn the time with a drink and a song.

Coron Bay lies next to Busuanga Island in the Southwestern part of the Philippines Islands. It is a remote area of the world where the local people fish and cater to diving enthusiasts while they quietly make their way through life. The protected waters are calm and warm, inviting even the smallest boat out onto the surface for aquatic explorations. We chose this location as the final leg of our three-week trip through the islands for good reasons: The wrecks, the isolation and the calm conditions. It was the perfect, relaxing end to a long trip of technical wreck diving on ships, planes and military tanks while dodging typhoons and technical SNAFUs. It was a simple one-hour flight from Manila but it felt worlds away from the overcrowded, polluted city into which we originally flew. Looking around, I tried to imagine what the bay was like sixty years ago, during World War II. It was so hard to believe that there was once a war fought in such a pristine, beautiful corner of the world.

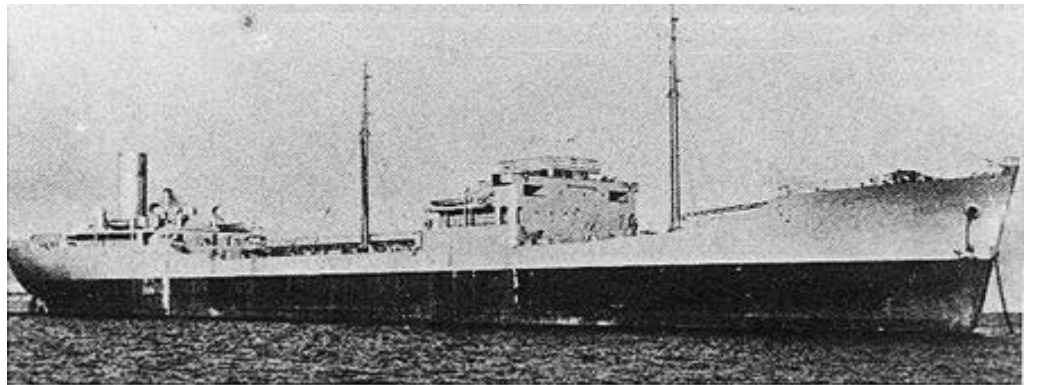
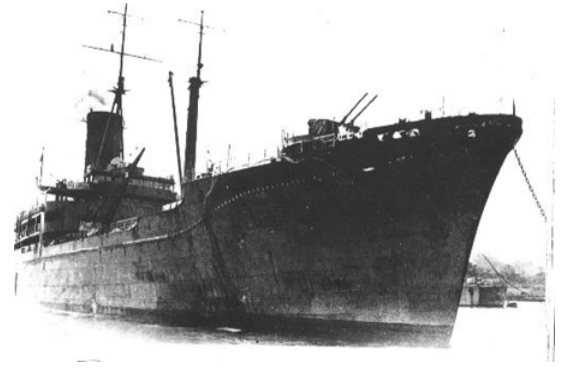
During that time, as the war in Southeast Asia began to turn in favor of the Allied forces, the Japanese Imperial Navy started to suffer significant casualties. Starting with Operation Hailstorm, in Truk Lagoon, Allied bombers began pummeling the fleet at every opportunity. With damaged ships and newfound fear of the Allied bombers, the Japanese Navy moved a large part of their fleet to Manila for repairs and provisions. But growing threats of the Curtiss SB2C-3 "Helldiver" bombers and Grumman F6F-3 "Hellcat" fighters, that repeatedly blew holes in the military and supply ships, caused the fleet to relocate several of their tankers, cargo and flying boat ships to Coron Bay, in the Southwestern islands of the Philippines, where they could hide among the tight channels of the bay. It was believed that the Allied bombers would not be able find the ships there and the ships and crew could wait for new orders on the quiet waters of the Bay.



Above: Coron Bay immediately after the attack. Several of the wrecks are labeled and burn as they sink under the surface.



Above: The Akitsushima Flying Boat Tender. The aircraft was never found and was assumed to be deployed at the time. **Right:** The refrigeration ship Irako. **Below:** The freighter Taiei Maru.



But the waters around Coron Bay did not stay quiet for long. On September 23rd, 1944, reconnaissance aircraft from Fast Carrier Group Task Force 38 spotted the ships and reported back to The U.S. Third Fleet, which was under the command of Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey aboard the battleship USS New Jersey. Tactical control of the Third Fleet rested with Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, who was in command of Fast Carrier Group Task Force 38 aboard the aircraft carrier USS Lexington. The air tasking orders were put together and a squadron of Helldivers and Hellcats from Task Force 38 departed early on the morning of September 24th to strike the ships. They struck hard and they struck fast, sending more than a dozen ships to the bottom of the ocean and damaging a number of others. Among the sunken vessels were the flying boat tender *Akitsushima*, cargo ship *Olympia*, refrigeration ship *Irako*, the freighters *Kogyo Maru*, *Taiei Maru* and *Kyokuzan*

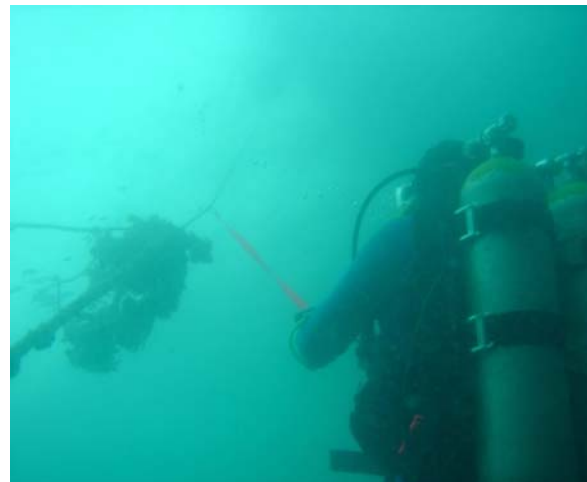
Maru as well as an assortment of support vessels and gun ships. All of these vessels hit the bottom of the bay intact and in one piece. The *Taiei Maru* folded near the bow but still sits upright, amazingly intact, as one solid structure. There are still some questions about the accuracy of the ship names, but these names represent the latest data at the time of our trip.



Above: Coron Bay today – a lazy afternoon sky above calm, quiet waters



Left: A stairwell between decks three and four in one of the cargo holds of the Tangat Wreck.



Right: Roy Nelsen hangs in the current on the buoy line while he decompresses after diving the Olympia.

Fast-forward sixty years, almost to the day. We flew to Manila via Taipei and spent a few days training and technical diving in Subic Bay on the ship and plane wrecks around the Bay. We then took a quick 1-hour hop to Busuanga Island. We were met at the pier by Gunter from Discovery Divers and took a quick little powerboat ride to the resort. Gunter's operation is first rate, combining comfortable, isolated accommodations with outstanding food and a talented, friendly staff.

As soon as we got there, we headed out on the first dive. We set out on a short 20-minute boat ride on the dive banca boat. A banca boat is basically a large canoe with outriggers on each side to stabilize it. This boat was huge though and easily fit the 6 divers with room to spare for another half-dozen. We reached the *Tangat* wreck and began suiting up. The wreck sits upright in 100 feet of water and has buoys tied off to the front and back. We chose to dive it in independent twins, using bracket kits from Intelligent Dive Systems. This increased our bottom time dramatically and allowed us to travel with only the compact bracket systems, rather than worrying about transporting and filling doubles after each dive. We simply loosened the straps and slipped another aluminum 80 into the rig. We dove on air rather than nitrox as we would be choosing dive sites on the fly and did not want to be limited to a certain depth due to a specific nitrox maximum operating depth. We did some initial penetration around the boilers of the wreck and through several of the cargo holds. The ship was in amazing condition, considering the amount of time that it had been submerged and the violent manner by which it met its demise. Gunter's divemaster, Thomas, was leading us through the holds and staircases and we were all checking each other's dive style out as well as consumption rates and ability to control the silt on the bottom of each room. It turned out that we were all about the same and this was going to be a great trip! We just nudged the edge of our decompression limit for this dive and surfaced after about an hour on the wreck. Following a frustrating week of aborted dives due to typhoons and adverse conditions in other parts

of the Philippines, *this was why we came half-way around the world!!!* The food during surface intervals was quite tasty and the crew joined in with the endless barrage of sarcasm and kidding that our group spontaneously unleashed on each other.

On the second day at the island, there was a typhoon in Manila that was threatening to complicate our dive plans so Gunter suggested that we go dive Barracuda Lake. *A LAKE?* Asking a bunch of tech divers to dive a lake is like asking a professional baseball player if he wants to pick up a game of stickball in the street. We agreed with the risk assessment of the typhoon however and trusted Gunter's judgment so we borrowed some single tank BCs and set out for the lake. We rock climbed over some treacherous rocks and into the mountain lake. The lake contains 82-degree fresh water at the surface but at 30 feet, we encountered a thermocline that *increased* the temperature to 100 degrees. The water was now salty too. We were in a geothermal lake.

Below: Divers climb the sharp, jagged rocks into Barracuda Lake.



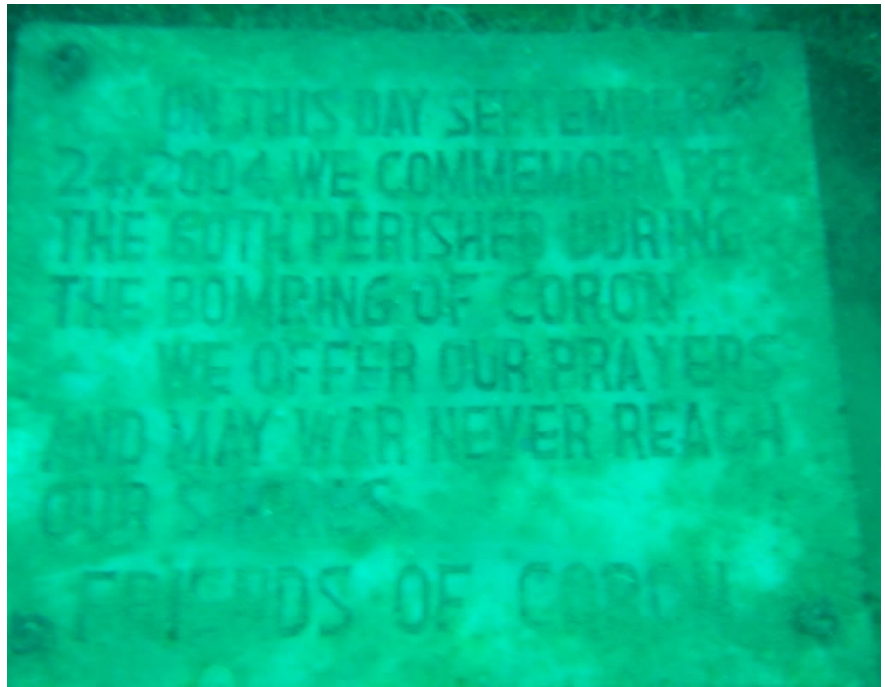
We hit 106 feet while we swam around, looking at cleaner shrimp and searching for the lone namesake of the lake – the friendly but shy barracuda. We finished the day with a reef dive where we encountered lionfish the size of basketballs and colorful clownfish, playing in anemones.

The next few days consisted of squeezing through the bowels of shipwreck after shipwreck. Thomas, the divemaster, knows these wrecks intimately and took us through areas that we would have never found on our own. With the two tanks on our back, we were not limited by air supply and only surfaced when the required hang time passed our boredom thresholds. We would usually be greeted by small schools of squid and baitfish along the anchor line. As a suggestion though, without the threat of a typhoon, dive sites can be planned more precisely and nitrox can be filled at Gunter's place. This would be a welcomed reduction to decompression time on the line.

There are so many wrecks in Coron that it would take a novel to do them all justice in writing. One of the favorites was the *Irako*. The *Irako* was a refrigeration ship and is almost 600 feet long, sitting upright in 140 feet of water. Down in its holds, there are still bottles from its cargo and countless areas to penetrate and wander around. The visibility on this wreck is usually great and the diver gets a very breathtaking and humbling view of how big this wreck actually is.

The *Kogyo Maru* is another local favorite. While exploring its cargo holds, the diver encounters cement bags and fencing that were rolled up and stacked for delivery for construction of runways. Moving away from the fencing though, we were suddenly face-to-face with a huge bulldozer. This was to be delivered with the supplies but now is home to the tropical fish of Coron Bay. The *Kogyo Maru* is over 300 feet long and lays on its port side in 110 feet of water.

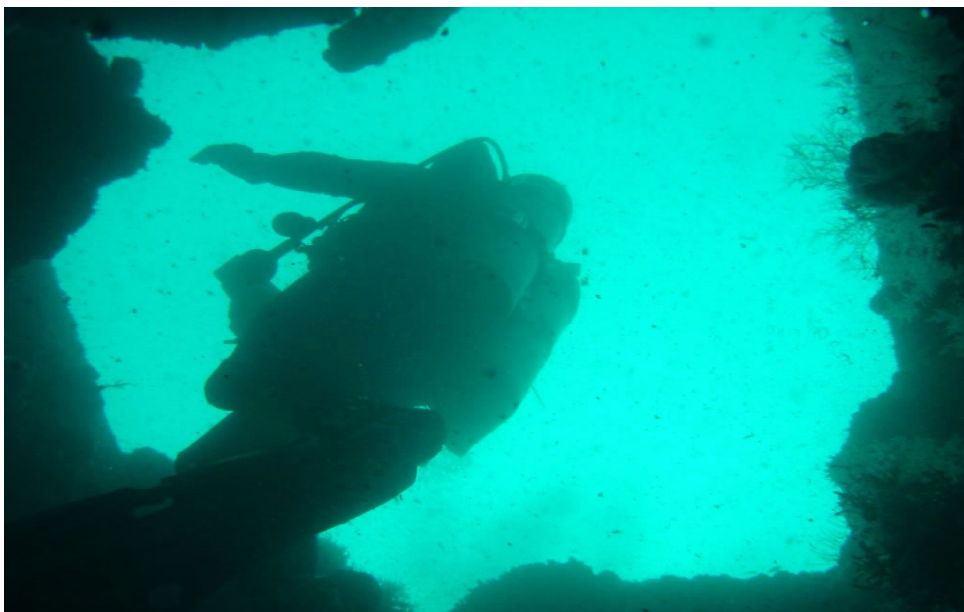
The Akitsushima was another one of the favorites of our dive group. It is a 500 foot long flying boat tender that lies on its port side in 140 feet of water. It still has intact anti-aircraft guns on its deck and was sunk by small tactical strikes, rather than catastrophic blows that would have torn apart the ship. Sinking down the buoy line, we were greeted by a school of 11 lionfish that were standing guard at the anchor point of the line. They didn't seem to be bothered by the visitors to their environment and ignored us as we snapped off a couple of pictures of them. The Akitsushima is another amazingly intact ship and the bomb holes in the deck of the ship were great penetration points as long as we watched the sharp metal around the edges. Only days before we arrived at Coron, there had been a ceremony for the sailors who died during the air strike and a commemorative plaque was placed on the Akitsushima, back by the flying boat crane, to remember the men who perished exactly 60 years prior. Reading the plaque, the gravity of the wrecks was amplified and reminded us that these wrecks, upon which we dove, were not simply sunk as artificial reefs. When these ships went down, they took people with them.



Upper Right: The plaque, honoring those who died in the attack on Coron. **Right:** The author (left) and Hans Bushenbacher relax on the bow of the banca boat after a day of diving. **Below:** Typhoons threaten the quiet waters of Coron Bay. **Bottom:** Scott Jamison rises out of a bomb hole in the Taiei Maru on our last day in Paradise.



The last day of diving held something special for us – the much anticipated propeller shaft of the Taiei Maru. This is not a dive that you can easily do on a single tank due to the length of the penetration and depth of the dive. It was the perfect pinnacle to a wonderful week of diving. We had dived an intact B-26 bomber, more than 230 feet under the ocean's surface, explored military tanks in 5-knot currents and enjoyed night dives on brilliant reefs and shipwrecks. Nothing compared to the Taiei Maru though. Perhaps it was the anticipation during 8 months of preparation or the thought of it being our last day in paradise, but none of us wanted to make that lonely ascent up the buoy line. That ascent meant packing, airports and cramped seats. It meant running to catch planes and bad airplane food. But worst of all, it meant we were going home. While we longed for our own beds, the thought of leaving such a pristine and wonderful place was a fact that was too unbearable to consider. So we milked every last moment that we could, sinking into cargo holds, control rooms and watching the tomato clowns play in their anemone homes. When we finally hit the turn point on our air supply, we hung our heads and headed up to our first stop. It was time to go home.



Before boarding the Super ferry back to Manila, Gunter called us all together and declared open bar while we all toasted our host and the wonderful staff who endured our practical jokes and not-so-witty anecdotes throughout the week. We laughed and told lies about our adventures and what we had seen. But we were all very quiet on the plane flight back to the States as we sat back with far off gazes in our eyes. We knew where we were headed but our hearts and imagination were not making the return trip. They stayed back in Coron, sitting at the bar with a San Miguel in one hand and our logbooks in the other.