ARTIFICIAL REEF

CORAL REEF SQUADRON

Shipwrecks fascinate me! There's no feeling to compare with the descent to their watery grave, watching the dark shadow beneath you form and take shape. I've dived many wrecks all over the world, but never an airplane and never an wreck sunken intentionally to create an artificial reef. Imagine my excitement when I heard about the Coral Reef Squadron in Phuket.

BY JOURNALIST & ACTION PHOTOGRAPHER: AYESHA CANTRELL

The Tsi Tsai Foundation initiated the project to create an artificial coral reef following operations to fix natural coral reefs that were damaged by the devastating Tsunami that hit Asia in late December 2004.

Four Douglas C-47 Dakota Skytrain military transport aircraft and six Sikorsky S-58T helicopters have been stripped and made ecologically sound and were sunk in May 2008. The venture was designed to attract new life and an underwater attraction to the Bay of Nang Tao. These craft would have seen heavy use during the conflict between May and were until recently mothballed in a Thai air base in Lopburi. The Tsi Tsai Foundation initiated the project to create an artificial coral reef following operations to fix natural coral reefs that were damaged by the devastating Tsunami that hit Asia in late December 2004.Their aluminium bodies make a suitable non corrosive structure while their shape should allow the flow of current. The project's completion was hampered by bad weather and overall took two years to successfully complete.

It was a last minute decision, cooked up with my dive buddy Chris, to take a detour to dive these wrecks.

We were close by, so why not? Without any planning and just a vague idea to arrive in Nang Tao and see what happened, our expectations weren't too high. Fortune sometimes does favour the foolish and we were lucky to run into Jeb, a local dive master who cheerfully arranged everything.

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Nang Tao is one of the quieter areas of Phuket and is beach seemingly popular with German and Scandinavian visitors. The long sandy beach is lined with resorts, hotels and restaurants, yet retains a sleepy laid back atmosphere.

Our longtail left the beach and leisurely made its way toward the wreck site. What little information I did have warned that poor visibility and strong current typified this site, so I was thrilled to hear that around a 20metre visibility spectrum could be expected today. Upon entering the water it became apparent that only the first 10m of water were clear, and within minutes we had all lost each other in the foggy green. Once reunited at the surface we re-descended and more closely followed the guideline.

The site itself is a gently sloping sandy bottom and the four massive Dakotas are arranged in the central points of the site. Four buoys bob on the surface to mark the Dakotas and guidelines run in between each wreck. These huge birds were transported up to 28 personnel and 3 crew and make easy swim throughs for all levels of diver. The choppers, without their 17m long rotor blades, are evenly spaced in between and in the centre, giving the whole site a star-like pattern. Only one Dakota retains its impressive 30m wingspan, this is the deepest and the one we descended onto first. The visibility really was appalling and I practically bumped into the wreck, and once again lost sight of Chris, but thanks from his numerous strobe quickly grew away his position. The planes are already showing signs of growth and have lost their metallic shine and bear the natural coating of the oceans advance. Their new colour is the green tinges that look like ghostly spectres of times passed, and the vision is really quite atmospheric. Holes have been drilled in the ceilings of each wreck to allow exhaled divers bubbles to harmlessly escape. The holes make me think of bullets strafing the metal in the heat of battle. Life is already moving in and hustlers schooled around the plane's nose and tail. A Lion Fish lurked inside, adding a splash of colour, and already sticking its claim to what will become fertile stalking ground.

We signalled to Jeb that we were ready to move on to view the nearby chopper. Having learnt our lesson we pulled ourselves hand over hand along the guideline. Still we quickly lost sight of each other arriving in somewhat of a pile up at the next wreck. The S-300 kilo choppers are smaller than the Dakotas, designed to carry 16 personnel and 2 crew, yet still roomy enough to easily swim through. The tiny tail section offered the most stunning light penetration, like viewing the ocean through a huge spider's web.

Our time was up, and as our ascent through the murky water brought us closer to the sun I realised that despite the visibility the diving had been a lot of fun. It had been an aquatic adventure unlike any other I had experienced, and the water conditions had actually created the inspiring mood of candlelight at a romantic dinner.

In my imagination I can see what an impressive and imposing sight the squadron would be in clear water, and it will be interesting to see how the life and growth progresses on this project. I've been to return, and speculate that another unplanned trip will find me on Nang Tao beach very soon.