



# SUB VISION OFF KOH TAO



A US submarine sunk in deep water off Thailand offers an unforgettable spectacle for technical divers, says  
**AYESHA CANTRELL**

**W**ORKING THROUGH THE WINTER of 1943/44, it must have been a cold and unforgiving time on the banks of Lake Michigan. The wartime employees of the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company could hardly have known that the story they began in those cold winter months, constructing US submarines, would conclude in the warm tropics, on the small Thai island of Koh Tao.

So hang up your drysuits, find a shortie and follow the crew of the ill-fated USS *Lagarto* to her resting place in the deep, clear waters of the South China Sea.

*Lagarto* was the 21st of 28 fleet-class submarines built by Manitowoc during World War Two, and the 11th of its

Balao-class boats. Weighing in at 1526 tons, she was 312ft long and carried two 5in deck guns and 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns.

Charles West, President of Manitowoc and a pioneer in his time, pressed for government military contracts and won them, despite having no direct seaward access. So the *Lagarto* had to make an amazing journey before even tasting salt water, travelling south on Lake Michigan to Chicago, down the Illinois River and onto an innovative floating dry dock in Mississippi, on to New Orleans then through the Panama Canal, to arrive in Pearl Harbour on the last Christmas Day of WW2.

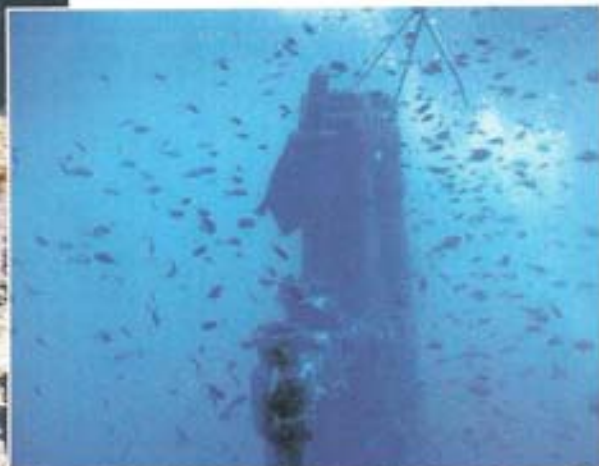
She received her orders and left the US base, only to vanish without trace



seven months after being commissioned, and weeks before the suspension of war.

Not long ago, deepwater explorers Jamie Macleod and Stewart Oehl took up the challenge to trace the *Lagarto*. Their journey led them through archives and military records, and had them poring over communication reports and

**Top:** Intact instruments on the bridge of the *Lagarto*.  
**Above:** Diving from the *Trident*.



bow of a Balao-class submarine.

Now it was my turn to enjoy that experience. Surrounded by blue water, checking equipment, opening valves, analysing gas and double-checking plans, it was difficult not to notice the reverent hush that had fallen over those aboard the gently rocking *Trident*.

It was either due to the depths we were about to plunge into or, more likely, to the deep respect the now-quiet *Lagarto* commands. Profoundly respecting it as a war grave, the dive team take very seriously their role as would-be curators.

Never disturbing but simply clearing the ocean's debris at the behest of the lost submariners' families, they are gradually revealing its intact magnificence.

No one on board survived to tell the story, but from US Navy records it can be gleaned that *Lagarto* suffered a fatal depth charge while attacking a convoy guarded by the fiercely protective Japanese destroyer *Hatsutaka*. The *USS Baya* was *Lagarto's* partner in the attack and was unable to re-establish contact, so her demise was simply assumed.

Descending the line surrounded by schooling jacks, my calmness was transformed quickly to awe as I caught sight

**Clockwise from top left:**

The *Lagarto's* conning tower; *mv Trident's* dive crew; star-spangled memorial flag; Stewart Dehl and Jamie Madeod head back to the wreck they discovered.

**Below:** The *Lagarto* in Chicago, on the inland section of her maiden voyage in 1944.



"last-knows" to locate probable resting places.

Losing a commercial fishing net is an expensive mistake, but one that can potentially pinpoint a wreck. It's an error no Thai fisherman wants to make twice, so such incidents are recorded, and for the price of a bottle of whisky and a few hours of your time, these and other marks can sometimes be garnered.

Almost exactly 60 years after *Lagarto's* launch, Jamie and Stewart were out with the crew of *mv Trident*, their newly purchased technical liveboard, on its maiden voyage.

Based on Koh Tao, a developing island off Thailand's east coast with a thriving dive and tourism industry, they were beginning their search of the Gulf of Thailand for this silent sentinel.

On the very first sweep of the area that their research had suggested, the on-board sounder located a seabed inconsistency. Eagerly Jamie and Stewart dropped 73m to investigate and, on the seabed, saw the inimitable profile of the



of the periscope shears and conning tower poking through the thermocline. It was a sight I'll never forget.

Now draped in a star-spangled banner, a commemorative gift from the relatives of Signalman First Class William T Mabin, this protrusion will entice you down.

Limited bottom time at this depth means that USS *Lagarto* is best not rushed but explored over a few dives. It deserves your time and consideration.

The conning tower and bridge are so uncannily intact. Complete with target data transmitter, telegraph and target sight, it's difficult not to position yourself behind these instruments and, in the silence, imagine yourself at battle stations.

**A FEW MORE FIN-KICKS** towards the bow will reveal the eerily silent guns that identified the wreck beyond doubt as *Lagarto*. Their spectral silhouettes are shrouded in lost fishing nets.

Drop over to the port side and the submarine's fatal wound is revealed. Metal torn like paper indicates the fury of her destruction. A reverential pause at the sealed escape hatch again gives the diver cause to consider.

You can hardly fail to notice the position of the dive planes and the hard-to-port rudder, indicating that *Lagarto* was in an evasive dive manoeuvre at the

last. Towards the bow, torpedo tube four's door is open, proving that a torpedo was fired in the final moments and that she went down fighting – a source of pride among the families of those lost.


Recent exploration by roving camera has concluded that the inner torpedo door was closed, leading to the belief that the tomb was and is fully sealed.

Standing at the foot of the bow is a must for any wreck diver, but I swear that no other wreck will have the same impact on your memory as this, because the distinctive outline is awesome, and the submerge holes let through an eerie light.

Pass by on the starboard side, and you will notice a heavily encrusted anchor.

A trip to the propellers will leave you dazzled by their sheer size and potential power. They dwarf even the tallest diver.

On the way there I noticed that the teak decking had succumbed to the ocean's destructiveness, revealing a mass of snaking cables, though the guns were still securely mounted.

The US Navy held an official rendezvous over the site and added a memorial plaque to the submarine before leaving the wreck, with no plans to salvage, as a monument to battles past. Dive trips are limited, but for any technical diver and wreck enthusiast this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. 

**Above:** Torpedo tube on the *Lagarto*.

**Right:** This memorial plaque was laid by the US Navy.



## FACTFILE

**FLIGHTS** ▶ Fly from the UK via Bangkok to Koh Tao's neighbouring island of Koh Samui and take a short boat ride.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ *Trident* is an exploratory deep wreck team, [www.techthailand.com](http://www.techthailand.com). It is based in Koh Tao, which offers accommodation ranging from 5\* hotels to beach huts. *Lagarto* apart, Koh Tao diving attractions range from titan triggerfish to reef sharks, with some whale shark sightings.

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ You can dive year-round but the best diving is from March-October. The monsoon season begins in November. Water temperature is 24-28°C.

**LANGUAGE** ▶ Thai but English widely spoken.

**MONEY** ▶ Baht.

**PRICES** ▶ A technical-diving day-trip aboard *Trident* costs around £130 a day.

**FURTHER INFORMATION** ▶ 020 7499 7679, [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)

