

# Pro Tactics: From Rec to Tec

## Leveraging the Legacy of the USS *Lagarto*

by Ayesha Cantrell

Having the good sense and fortune to successfully innovate in a saturated market is one thing but, imagine finding yourself doing that by re-discovering WWII wrecks submerged deep below the clear blue temperate waters of the Gulf of Thailand?

Jamie Macleod and Stewart Oehl don't have to imagine.

Based on the sun-drenched island of Koh Tao off the South East Coast of Thailand, Macleod and Oehl realized the island's dive industry needed to offer something a little different and a bit more challenging than the effortless reef diving with which the island is synonymous.

Macleod, a PADI Course Director, DSAT TecRec Instructor Trainer and Thai diving veteran, and Oehl, a DSAT Tec Deep Instructor, are both passionate deep water explorers and self-confessed wreck ferrets who pooled their resources and desire for the unknown and set out to offer Koh Tao visitors and residents alike something more meaty to dive.

Remember the T-shirt that said, "Remember when diving was dangerous and sex was safe?" As a PADI Member for



19 years, Macleod had noticed a growing demand for more challenging dive experiences beyond recreational diving. This seems to ring true on a global scale, looking at the growth in the PADI Enriched Air, Deep and Wreck Diver courses, as well as in the DSAT Tec Deep and Tec Trimix Diver certifications. This evolution is currently driven by dive professionals and experienced divers – and with its 40 dive centers, these are things Koh Tao has plenty of. Forming a technical dive school to meet this demand for training and skills looked

like the way forward.

"Technical diving isn't for everyone, but we wanted to extend the training to those who seek a variety of challenges," says Macleod.

To achieve this and simultaneously differentiate themselves from both the existing recreational and technical markets, the team got down to business exploring the Gulf of Thailand with a newly acquired exploration boat, the MV *Trident*. As a busy shipping route to Bangkok and a major supply route during WWII, Macleod and Oehl were convinced the hitherto unexplored waters around Koh Tao were littered with undiscovered wrecks, each with its own particular story to tell. But, exploring the ocean floor is a painstaking and expensive business requiring time, experience, extensive research and a lot of luck.

### The Find

On 3 May 1945, US Navy records show that the USS *Boya* and USS *Lagarto* attacked a convoy guarded by the HIJMS *Hatsutaka*, which subsequently reported a depth charge attack on the USS *Lagarto*. The USS *Boya* was not able to re-establish radio contact with the USS *Lagarto* after the battle, and it was assumed the depth charge was responsible for sinking the sub-





marine. However, exactly what happened to her and her final resting place remained a mystery for more than 60 years. Heading out on her maiden voyage, it was the mystery of the USS *Lagarto's* fate and final resting place the DSAT Tec Deep Divers aboard the MV *Trident* hoped to solve. And, when the sounder showed an anomalous reading rising 15 metres/49 feet from the ocean floor, anticipation soared.

Descending a shot line to investigate the unknown is one of the most exceptional experiences a deep-water explorer can have, particularly when at its end you find exactly what you were looking for: Lying in 72 metres/236 feet of water, 95 metres/311 feet long and in one piece the Balao class



USS *Lagarto* was officially identified by both her location and her unusual 127 millimetre/5 inch guns mounted fore and aft of the conning tower. Damage to the port side indicates she was indeed hit by a depth charge. The position of her dive planes and rudder suggest she made a hard dive to port in her final moments – a classic evasive maneuver – and an open torpedo tube further suggest she went down fighting. Her discovery provides answers as to her fate and gives closure to the families of the veterans. The US Navy rendezvoused with the MV *Trident* over the site to formally recognize the USS *Lagarto* and to memorialize the



lives of the servicemen lost. You can still see the brass plaque and flag the navy placed on the wreck today.

The USS *Lagarto* is respected as a war grave, and the US Navy has no plans to disturb her final resting place. Dive trips are limited due to depth and location, but her distinctive shape, silent guns and bridge, complete with target data transmitter, telegraph and target sight will awe those lucky enough to make one.

Since that first discovery, Macleod and Oehl have gone on to discover no fewer than eight first-rate deep wreck sites with many more locations researched and waiting to be explored. Beyond Micronesia's Truk Lagoon and areas of the Philippines

and Egypt, few technical dive areas exist with so many high quality sites close at hand. Macleod's and Oehl's discoveries mean their decision to make tec diving a niche market has created a world class technical dive destination in the shadows of one of the world's most successful recreational dive regions. ♦



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