After its rediscovery, each dive revealed new information as to Lagarto, ending the 60-year mystery of the missing submarine. Jamie Macleod was the first to catch a glimpse of the USS aboard MV Trident whose owners were also the discoverers of the wreck. It was going to be no ordinary wreck dive. Either way this animal in its true habitat. Or possibly it’s the opportunity to peek behind the veil of secrecy that all submarines exude. Either way this is the USS Lagarto’s final moments. Over dinner Jamie explains that she went down fighting, a fact that has become a source of pride amongst the relatives of the deceased.

The next morning dawns clear and calm. Gasses are checked, equipment tested and plans reviewed. With my buddy, Wilco, stepping off the deck into the crystal blue water. The splash of our entry seems at odds with the calm ocean. We quietly pull ourselves to the down line in deference to the war grave we are about to visit. Seventy metres is a long way to travel but very quickly we notice huge schools of jacks circling, some black, some silver, displaying typical mating colours. Massive barracuda stalk just within visibility range. Below, the unmistakable shape of periscope shears appears through the thermocline, sending unforgettable silhouettes down my spine.

The conning tower is encrusted in growth yet is fully intact. The next morning dawns clear and calm. Gasses are checked, equipment tested and plans reviewed. With my buddy, Wilco, stepping off the deck into the crystal blue water. The splash of our entry seems at odds with the calm ocean. We quietly pull ourselves to the down line in deference to the war grave we are about to visit. Seventy metres is a long way to travel but very quickly we notice huge schools of jacks circling, some black, some silver, displaying typical mating colours. Massive barracuda stalk just within visibility range. Below, the unmistakable shape of periscope shears appears through the thermocline, sending unforgettable silhouettes down my spine.

The conning tower is encrusted in growth yet is fully intact. The target data transmitter, a twin tanks. Turning, I notice his torchlight circling the dome-shaped pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit.

The USS Lagarto lies in pristine condition in 72m of clear warm water in the Gulf of Thailand. Shipwrecks have always mesmerised me but a submarine, belonging underwater, seems somehow different, like observing an animal in its true habitat. Or possibly it’s the opportunity to peek behind the veil of secrecy that all submarines exude. Either way this was going to be no ordinary wreck dive.

Getting to the wreck site is an overnight cruise from Koh Tao allowing MV Trident whose owners were also the discoverers of the wreck. Jamie Macleod was the first to catch a glimpse of the USS Lagarto, ending the 60-year mystery of the missing submarine. After its rediscovery, each dive revealed new information as to the USS Lagarto’s final moments. Over dinner Jamie explains that she went down fighting, a fact that has become a source of pride amongst the relatives of the deceased.

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Dropping over the side of the deck we see the only damage to this fully intact upright wreck, undoubtedly caused by a depth charge. The fatal blow was let loose from the Japanese destroyer Hatsutaka during the Lagarto’s attack on a Japanese convoy. The sight of the outer hull, tore like paper, demonstrates the rage of battle like nothing else I have ever seen.

Our time is up and we return to the con where a “star spangled banner” was raised during a memorial. John and Beth, the grandparents of Signalman First Class William T. Malin, who served on the Lagarto’s final patrol, attended this memorial. Upon being shown video footage of the wreck Beth commented: “With all the fish and the coral covering the Lagarto, it’s almost like someone put flowers on a grave.” The submerged flag waves with the oceans movement, and I take a moment to reflect before starting our long ascent to the surface.

Our next dive was planned to progress our exploration forward towards the bow, to start reading the story of her final battle written in her metal remains. Arrival at the conning tower the second time is still overwhelming and it’s difficult not to tarry and gaze in awe on the way to the bow. Curious barracuda follow us and white soft coral bushes sprout from where the teak deck would once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit. I pull up short when Wilco clangs a deco tank against his larger once have been, revealing a mess of cables like snakes writhing in a pit.
The final piece of the puzzle fits into place on our subsequent dives, where we explore sternwards. On the longer swim to the propellers there is much to see and the bushes of white coral seem even more prolific than towards the bow. The destructive rear gun is approached through a veritable forest of coral and sits neatly in an opening, as if the ocean respects its power. The gun is poignantly decorated with a single colourful feather star. I’m startled when a large red snapper darts out from behind the gun, breaking the spell. A once shiny plaque recently left by US Navy divers, who officially confirmed identification, is attached to a capstan. Dropping over the stern, it was the rudder I was interested to see. Positioned hard to port, it confirms along with the dive planes, that the submarine was in a classic evasive maneuver at its last. The only other must-see feature on any wreck dive are the propellers, and due to the classic tapering shape of the stern, you can actually swim out beneath the wreck and in between them. This is a tremendous feeling; no other swim-through will be quite the same. The massive screws sit on each side of the submarine, making Wilco’s 6ft frame seem tiny in comparison.

Our final return to the con comes all too quickly, but it reminds me that I’m lucky to have this opportunity. Few divers are trained to this depth and due to the site’s location fewer still will ever be fortunate enough to visit. The site is classed as a war grave and there are no plans for salvage. I leave with the hope of someday returning, content that the Lagarto has and will continue to be treated with the respect that she deserves.

The life of any submariner in WWII was a hard one. The constant humidity, cramped living conditions and three rotating watches combined for a psychological and physical strain endurable only by the well-trained elite. However, the silent terror that their vessels constantly represented to the enemy was not only crucial but also certainly deadly. Submariners made up just 2 percent of US Navy personnel yet they were responsible for the sinking of 55 percent of Japanese tonnage. Success was at a cost though, as these fearless men worked in unforgiving circumstances and their machines of stealth could quickly become their coffin. Proof of the risk a submariner endured is illustrated to this day, as enrolment in the corps remains voluntary.