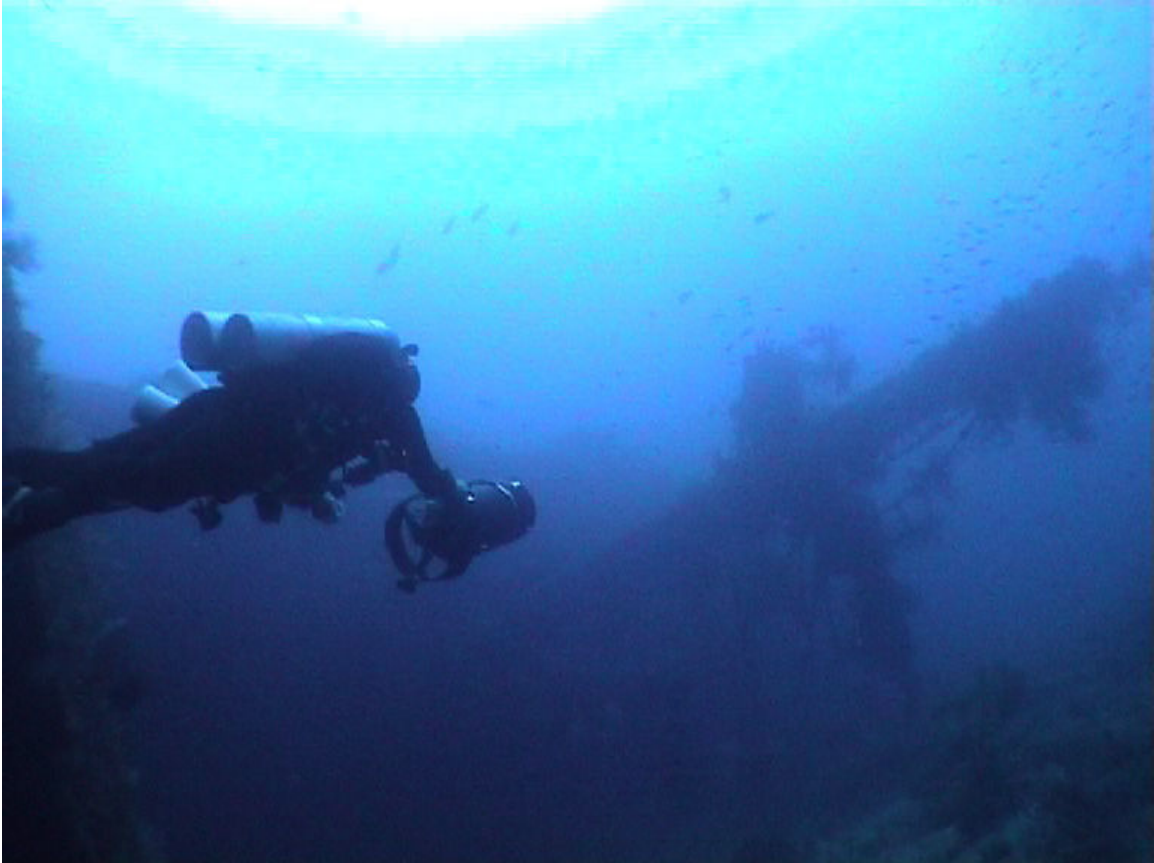


Wreck Exploration in Asia

Philippine Wrecks

By Dave Ross



J. Mobbs

Diver resurfacing after a scooter dive in the Pacific

With more than seven thousand islands and eighty million people trading and moving amongst them, one can rightly assume that—whether it be due to the vagaries of weather or to human errors and mechanical failings—the Philippines has had its share of shipping disasters. Add to that a

phenomenal list of WWII maritime casualties, and the opportunities for wreck divers begin to look boundless.

Some of these wrecks are grouped together and easy to access. The Japanese wrecks sunk at anchor in Coron Bay, for instance, or the Spanish, American and Japanese vessels lying in Subic Bay all enjoy full service dive shop support nearby, and have been well researched and documented over

the years. Recently, two further wrecks within striking distance of Puerto Galera have had their histories explored. I will recount here how this came about, and how these wrecks are to dive.

Thanks to a developing nucleus of interested and capable divers, it has now become more plausible to run charters to two sites known as the Mactan ferry and the Nasugbu wreck. Though the story of the Mactan was incomplete, its identity was known; the wreck of the second vessel was a complete mystery on both counts. This prompted me to conduct a little amateur research into these two vessels, and into anything else that may be lying on the bottom, unlocated or long-forgotten.

Our own location, the Verde Island Passage and Tablas Straits, appeared promising at first. The straits between Mindoro and Luzon frame the busiest seaway in the country, with all shipping between Manila and points south passing right in front of the dive shop. A few miles away off of Dumali Point lies the scene of the worst peacetime disaster in maritime history. In December 1987, the ferry Dona Paz collided with the tanker Vector and sank, resulting in a staggering loss of 4,386 lives. It is questionable as to whether anyone would ever want to dive such an awful gravesite, even if it were possible. Assuredly though, it will never be. Where not to look was easily gleaned from a simple glance at the charts, which revealed that almost every wreck in the shipping lanes, other than those very proximal to Manila, would be three hundred to five hundred meters deep. Anything sinking here, unless beached, was gone for good.

Beached however, occasionally happens. A hundred kilometers southeast of here, in the Tablas Straits, off of Maestro de Campo Island, lies a crafty bit of damage control. Though in the U.S. or Europe this would have been a very well documented loss, there is little public awareness of it here. This shipwreck, the “Mactan ferry,” as we knew it, was the site of many regular trips for us. However, although we always enjoyed the diving there, we knew almost nothing about the vessel other than that it foundered in a storm in the early 1970s.

While a day trip to the Mactan is a bit of a push, a two-day liveaboard is ideal; the local MV Tabibuga provides a good eight-diver platform. This beautiful wreck is a Philippine favorite for everyone who dives her. Lying off of a small island with no silty runoff, she is easy to locate. She rests on her starboard side on a reef slope in perfect Tech 1 country (twenty-two to forty-nine meters in depth), with her bow pointed toward shore. A deeper reef lies just within view of the stern. The clear water, intact structure, kingposts festooned with black corals, and inquisitive fish offer divers with no interest in penetration many things on which to focus their attention. Add to this several opportunities for penetration—from open cargo holds to a tight dusty engine and machine rooms—and this small ship is good for many days of diving. Great stuff, but what was her story?



J. Mobbs
David Ross preparing for a dive on the MV Mactan

When an e-mail from Quest Managing Editor Panos Alexakos hinted that the magazine could use more material from the Asian region, a couple of us resolved to try and gather some. Once the need for historical background on the ship took me beyond my

previous idle curiosity, I began to treat the research more seriously. Googling "Mactan wreck" proved futile, because most of the existing information appeared on my own web site, on simple strength of being listed as a dive site. No luck there, so I tried plan B: talking with the local population. This was abandoned following a conversation with someone trying to establish a land-based operation there. Being from the Australian school of humor, he didn't pull any punches. "There are six thousand people on the island, and they've all got the same family name," he commented. "It's like Tasmania."

The web site of the Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA) of the Philippines revealed that a vessel named Mactan was operated by Compania Maritima (which tallied with the logo on the funnel), but provided no further details. Efforts to contact the Philippine Coastguards and Port Authorities for records drew blanks. The International Registry of Sunken Ships provided no more than what we already knew. Then I ran across the International Maritime History Information Exchange Group and posted to their list. How ironic that a diver from North Carolina (thank you, Bob Birmingham) should respond with more details about a Philippine ferry wreck than anyone in the Philippines was willing or able to volunteer.

Bob's source was an out-of-print Lloyd's publication, *Modern Shipping Disasters 1963-1987*, which was eventually found on eBay. Thanks to Bob, we now had our history. The MV Mactan, built in 1961 by Nippon Kokan in Shimizu, measured eighty-three meters in length and weighed 1,736 gross registered tons. On July 15, 1973, she was en route from Nasipit in Mindanao to Manila carrying lumber, plywood and bananas, plus 680 passengers and crew, when, in severe weather, she began flooding and listed. Her Master steered her toward shore on the leeward side of Maestro de Campo Island and attempted to beach her. Unfortunately, she sank just offshore at 5:30 AM on July 16, after 657 people were miraculously saved. Nonetheless, following the sinking, the Philippine Coastguard detained the ship's forty officers and crew, blaming the deaths and loss of the ship on

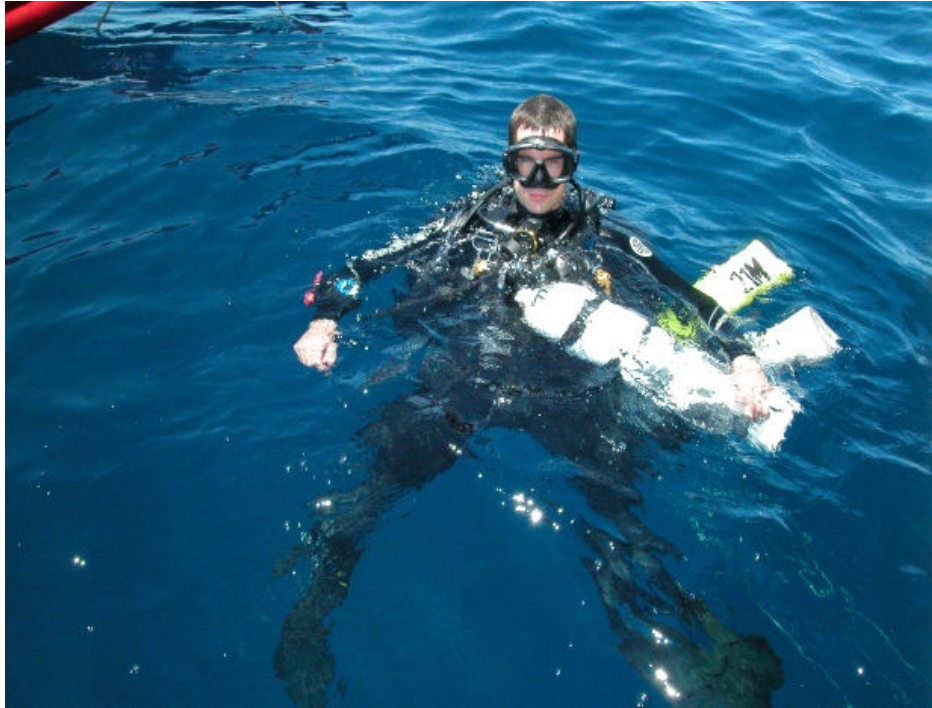
the incompetence and negligence of the ship's company. Where that inquest led, we have no idea.

With the story of the Mactan now partially unraveled, Bob provided us with lists of Mindoro-area WWII Japanese losses from his JANAC records. My wreck-diver's excitement and naiveté got the better of me for a short while. Here was a list of forty-eight Japanese wrecks, all on home turf! Out came the charts, only shortly thereafter to be followed by the realization that a ship's name and coordinates really did not take one very far. I learned this lesson while examining a destroyer's coordinates that placed the warship twenty miles inland, halfway up the second-highest mountain in the Philippines. This led to another important lesson: Don't trust historical records. In the heat of battle, position-recording is often not accurate. Other locations in southern Mindoro, however, do warrant investigation, as there have been enough rumors in diving circles over the years that "something is there" to justify future effort.

War wrecks aside, *Modern Shipping Disasters* presented us with an opportunity to learn more about another of our occasionally dived merchant shipwrecks. Reportedly lost in the early 1980s, this wreck was discovered by divers in the late 1990s lying between Fortune Island and Nasugbu in Batangas province, near the mouth of Manila Bay (the location was learned from fishermen). To my knowledge, almost all diving here in the early days was on air, despite the seventy-meter depth to the seabed. Unsurprisingly, descriptions of the wreck were hazy, ranging from it being a freighter to a foreign fishing vessel. Here again, local knowledge failed to supply clues to the wreck's history, and naturally, given the limitations divers were placing upon themselves in their choice of gas, attempts to locate evidence such as a builder's plaque had proved futile. I made two trimix dives here in early 2001, which gave my team member and me a reasonable feel for the wreck, but the closings of the local dive shops around Nasugbu prevented us from returning for the next several seasons, and overall diving activity on the wreck quieted down.

Modern Shipping Disasters looked like it could provide an answer, the only problem being that the thousands of entries in the

book are alphabetically listed over five hundred pages, rather than categorized by region. The laborious process of scanning



H. Moore
Diver prepares for a dive on the MV Coral Island

from page one began. Despite being time-consuming, it did turn up some good stories, such as the one about a Greek ship that capsized, its crew blaming the 2,500 live sheep it was carrying for doing what sheep do best and moving en masse to the same side of the ship. Luckily, the entries under the letter “C” gave us what we wanted: the MV Coral Island, which perfectly matched the location, assumed dimensions, and supposed date and description of the ship we were seeking.

Learning the ship’s likely identity coincided nicely with finding a group of able divers who were prepared to give things a shot during an overnight trip this past May. Hugh Moore and Jimmy Goodwin, Australian cave divers introduced to GUE by instructor Martin Lorenzo, along with wreck-trained divers Tex Ho Song and John Tattersall, and Sam Collett and myself as staff, decided to spend a couple of days there for the first time in four years. A muttering Martin Lorenzo was left behind that weekend, sadly

confined to the office as punishment for doing too much cave diving the month before. Regardless, we aimed to match what we saw in the water with the ship’s description that we now had.

The outline of the MV Coral Island was that of a Japanese ship, a general cargo vessel built by Kure Zosen-sho in 1965. At 1,459 gross registered tons, she measured 73.4 by 11.43 by 5.21 meters. Operated by the Coral Island Resorts Development Corporation and often used for transporting medical supplies for a government agency, her final voyage was in July 1982. She was en route from Batangas to Manila when she suffered an explosion during engine testing; the subsequent fire killed twenty-one of the ninety-five people on board. Being in a busy shipping lane, the survivors were soon picked up by container ships and taken to Manila while the ship burned and finally sank three days later on July 29.

A trip to this wreck required a day of blending and boat-loading, and then a bleary-eyed 4 AM start. The MV Rags is a local outrigger-style boat, which, for the purposes of these trips, is skippered by its owner, the very practical and competent Frank Doyle: not a GUE man, but the sort of person who gets things done, and who you'd be happy to have along if things ever went wrong. In years past, the boat would have been big enough to overnight on; all that went aboard was a compressor and some oxygen. Today, the need for mixed gas and a more sophisticated fill set up has made conditions cramped. It is now far more practical to sleep on shore at a nearby resort, making overall for a very comfortable trip.

The dive site is very exposed, but in April and May, between the monsoons, glassy calm conditions often prevail. My previous visit had seen clear water all the way down, but on this occasion, particularly during the first day, the bottom layers were a bit dark and silty. Nevertheless, visibility was good enough, and the four dives everyone made were adequate to gain a very good knowledge of the ship.

Upright, the ship's deck is at sixty meters, and the top of the superstructure is a bit below fifty meters. The size of the ship is consistent with its description, and the remaining superstructure looks like what you would expect it to be on a ship that had spent three days on fire. Everything non-metallic was long gone. The size of the superstructure also suggested that the ship carried both passengers and cargo, which would explain why a seventy-meter vessel

was carrying ninety-five people. Skylight access offered a view into what appeared to be a small engine room, large enough to hold only a couple of men. The degree of damage and plate-buckling in this aft area was consistent with the explosion described on the MV Coral Island.

With a lot of our diving attention focused on the stern and amidships, the forward cargo holds would bear more study in the future. Located in the hold immediately forward of the bridge are an interesting truck or jeep chassis and the remains of a motorbike. What lies below the tween decks we visited and in the further forward holds remains to be seen.

With safety in mind, bottom times were kept reasonably short—not so much because gas management or diver capability was an issue, but because of the possibility of an interrupted deco due to shipping traffic in the area. The frequency of traffic here makes it a wonder that there haven't been more collision-related losses.

In the absence of any other recorded wreck in this general vicinity, and with our observations so closely matching the Lloyd's records for the MV Coral Island, our identification of the shipwreck seems positive. Our personal assessment of the wreck is like that of the MV Mactan: There is a lot to see, and it's absolutely worth going back to



MV Coral Island
Sunk July 29th 1982
73.41m x 11.43m x 5.21m

Courtesy of D. Ross

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