

HIJMS Amagiri



IN THE EARLY HOURS OF AUGUST 2ND 1943, HIS IMPERIAL JAPANESE MAJESTY'S SHIP AMAGIRI, A POTENT FUBUKI CLASS DESTROYER, WAS RACING NORTH THROUGH THE NARROW CONFINES OF BLACKETT STRAIT IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS. A FORMIDABLE WEAPONS PLATFORM OF HER TIME WITH THREE TWIN 5" MAIN GUN MOUNTS, THREE SETS OF TRIPLE 24" TORPEDO TUBES, NUMEROUS 25MM ANTI AIRCRAFT GUNS AND ABUNDANT DEPTH CHARGES, SHE'D ALREADY SEEN HER SHARE OF ACTION IN WWII.

Having just completed a troop/supply drop at Vila on Kolombangara Island, as part of the regular 'Tokyo Express' runs that were tasked with supplying Japan's increasingly beleaguered island garrisons, she and her three consort destroyers Hagikaze, Arashi and Shigure were in a hurry to get 'home' to Rabaul before dawn, so they would not fall prey to daylight American air power. With no time to lose they were moving at top speed, well over 30 knots. However, stationed in Blackett Strait to intercept just such nightly 'runs' were several US Navy PT boats, also known as motor torpedo boats, idling about and looking for trouble. For one of those PT boats, serious trouble was on the way!

In command of that one boat, PT 109, was a young lieutenant (jg) by the name of John F Kennedy. Though just another of the many PT boat skippers at the time, as it turned out he was destined to become a future president of the United States of America. Suddenly and without warning as his PT boat had no radar, off the starboard quarter the knife-like bow of a speeding ship was seen bearing down on his much smaller craft. Before Kennedy had time to evade, Amagiri had sliced through the tiny PT boat, killing several crew and leaving the rest adrift in the darkness of Blackett Strait. The incident occurred so fast that not a single shot was fired by either ship! Managing to make it to shore on a tiny islet the next day with the surviving members of his injured crew, Kennedy soon showed the courage and leadership qualities that would serve him well in later life. Every night for the next several nights he swam back out into the treacherous current-racked waters of Blackett Strait, hoping to 'find' another patrolling PT boat to come to their rescue, barely making it back to the islet each morning.

Eventually Solomon Islanders discovered the survivors, a message was sent via the natives to other Americans and Kennedy and his surviving crew were rescued. Kennedy's dramatic presidency – the Cuban Missile Crisis is still considered the closest the world has come to all-out nuclear war, and his subsequent assassination that brought Lyndon Johnson to power – what might have transpired in those later years had Kennedy died that night in the Solomons? Renowned explorer Robert Ballard's 'book describing the 2002 discovery of the wreck of PT109 was suitably titled 'Collision With History'.

The Amagiri hardly felt the collision with the relatively small PT boat and made it safely home to her base at Rabaul. She continued to be involved in numerous Tokyo Express runs and skirmishes with the US Navy over the next eight months, surviving



The Japanese destroyer that almost altered the course of history:

- The forward set of triple torpedo tubes now lay upside down on the bottom, the tubes themselves half filled with sand. This is the only torpedo mount where the crews protective enclosure is still partially intact, when view side on.
- Right: The wreck of Amagiri is now so coral encrusted that in many places it more resembles a reef than a shipwreck, as the barrels of the aft five-inch mount, which lays on its side, clearly shows.

them all. Amagiri's luck eventually ran out on 23 April 1944 off the east coast of the Indonesian island of Kalimantan (Borneo) about 60 nautical miles south of Balikpapan in the Makassar Strait – she struck a mine believed to have been laid by the US submarine Tautog. She lay undiscovered for almost 60 years until she was located with the aid of side-scan sonar in only 28m/92ft of water by Vidar Skoglie / MV Empress. The wreck was positively identified during subsequent dives in October 2003. In some parts of the world at least, you don't always have to go deep to still discover historically significant virgin wrecks!

Almost 15 months transpired before the dive liveboard Empress could get back to the Amagiri wreck site because her resting place is 'off the beaten track' – and this was one voyage I wasn't going to miss. My wife Miria and I boarded Empress in Ujung Padang (Makassar) on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, after flying there from Brisbane via Bali on Garuda Airlines. We then spent several days

diving on the nearby wrecks of the Japanese minesweepers W11 and W16 while waiting for errant expedition member Phil Yeutter to arrive. (As this was a special exploratory expedition there was to be no other 'regular' guests on board, except for delayed Empress stalwart Phil of course.)

W16, though laying on her port side in 40m/130ft, is the more exciting dive with substantial damage to her hull under her forward section attesting to her savage demise and allowing penetration to her interior. Her wheelhouse is partially intact, though fallen away from the now vertical deck, and her forward single gun mount is still in place and clearly visible. Penetration aft allows a look into a very well-stocked ammunition magazine and here skeletal remains again are a reminder of her brutal end. On the bottom beside her stern deck are numerous unexploded depth charges and what appear to be the remains of some of her mine sweeping gear. W11 lays nearer to shore, upright in 30m/100ft, and is covered in lush soft

coral growth. However, as she's had all her upper works removed (probably to avoid becoming a navigation hazard, as she's right at the edge of the main shipping channel into the port of Makassar) the wreck is not immediately distinguishable as a warship. Fish life abounds on both wrecks.

Eventually Phil arrived so we set off on a two day crossing of the Makassar Strait, which included some side-scan searching, and arrived late one afternoon above Amagiri's wreck site. We anchored up, set the down-line and were soon in the water on this famous, or infamous as the case may be, warship.

The wreck lies more or less on its starboard side, but due to the shallow depth, seasonal wave action, some strong currents and ample evidence of dynamite fishing, she's collapsed down into herself and split open more than any other warship I've ever seen. In parts it looks like someone has taken a can-opener to her!



From the left:

- The collapse of the amidships set of triple torpedo tubes through the deck has allowed for easy access into the innards of the ship.
- A wall of five-inch shells stored in the rear magazine deep inside the wreck of the Japanese minesweeper W16.
- Human remains inside the wreck of the Japanese minesweeper W16 attest to the horrors of war
- HIJMS Amagiri showing her pre-war configuration. Note that the torpedo tubes do not yet have their crew's protective enclosures and the rear five-inch gun mount above the deckhouse is still in place.
- A side-scan sonar image of the wreck of Amagiri taken in January 2005.



This structural collapsing has opened up areas that would normally be very difficult to access and making this one seriously awe-inspiring dive. Probably the most dramatic destruction is under the forward twin 5" gun mount and around and beneath the bridge area where it appears an illegal 'fish bomber' got the surprise of his life when his bomb set off the forward ammunition magazine! A huge area is vaporized, hardly a recognizable item remains – most of the hull, all the deck and lower bridge structure is simply gone or now in matchstick size pieces. (This destruction was definitely not caused by the mine hit, as Amagiri reportedly took almost two hours to sink. Damage of this kind would have sunk the sturdiest ship immediately.)

Forward of the twin 5" mount now lying on its side, the foredeck is mostly intact and orientated vertically with capstans and anchor chains clearly visible. The sharp bow which sliced through PT109 sits up off the seabed somewhat with several large stingrays making their home in the resultant alcove under the wreck. A 'buckle' or indentation part way down the actual bow stem is very prominent. Could this be from a weakening in that area from the collision with PT109 which subsequently collapsed or deteriorated over time at a faster rate than the rest of the bow?

Nothing of the lower bridge remains except a tangle of cables and piping, while the rangefinder and director atop, though collapsed, are still clearly recognisable, as are several other smaller spotting devices lying nearby. Traveling towards the rear one crosses the now soft-coral encrusted tripod mast stretching out on the seabed and right behind this are the remains of the forward funnel, the boilers now exposed beneath it where the deck has parted and slipped down from the hull itself. Just behind this is an upturned set of empty triple torpedo tubes. The remains of another funnel is next, then a pile of reload or spare torpedoes strewn randomly like thick felled logs! A little further on is the second set of triple torpedo (again empty), upright and intact,

though they've collapsed through the deck allowing penetration into the tangled remains of the engine room. Also collapsed nearby are two sets of triple 25mm anti aircraft guns, while out on the seabed rests another completely intact torpedo. Close by, the third and final set of triple torpedo tubes splays fan-like on the remains of the port deck with their protective 'house' completely rotted away and the tubes also empty. (It is presumed from finding all nine torpedo tubes empty that the action ready torpedoes inside the tubes at the time the mine was struck were either ejected over the side or fired off to lighten the ship before she actually sank.)

More explosive fishing damage is also discernible astern, but not to such an extent as forward. Her X or number two twin 5" mount is 'missing' from above the rear deckhouse, confirming it was definitely removed and replaced by several lighter triple 25mm anti-aircraft weapons during a refit in late 1943 which now lay detached on the sand beside the wreck. Just behind this structure is the Y or number three twin 5" mount lying on its side, with the gun crews protective enclosure completely rotted away, fully exposing the twin gun breaches and barrels that point directly behind. Scattered about abaft this general area are numerous depth charges and depth charge 'throwers' or catapult devices.

A little further on the wreck abruptly ends with the rounded stern well collapsed, though just under the stern the rudder and two relatively large high-speed propellers are clearly visible, all partly buried in the sandy bottom. This alcove, where the wreck is partially held up off the bottom by the Y-shaped propeller-shaft braces, is home to several large black and spotted stingrays, the odd banded sea snake and a massive school of barracuda was regularly seen circling the stern.

Varied fish life abounds, both large and small - including several variety of stingray and a number of very inquisitive sea snakes - while both hard and soft coral growth thrive. There is so much hard coral growth in many places that it sometimes



- Scattered about Amagiri amidships, like giant felled logs, are numerous reload or 'spare' torpedos. Cylindrical depth charges and their attendant depth charge 'thrower' cradles lay scattered about the rear deck. The wire cables running through this image are the anti-mine degaussing cables from the ships hull. Little good they seem to have done!
- The rear set of triple torpedo tubes have completely collapsed and are now splayed fan like on the port deck.
- The dive liveaboard MV Empress is well equipped for exploration diving with an onboard recompression chamber, continuous blend nitrox/trimix system, ample gas storage space and a divers 'elevator lift' visible on the stern in this photo



takes several dives to recognize just what object you're actually looking at. Probably the only drawback on the wreck is that its liberally adorned with long spined sea urchins waiting to spike unwary divers. Yes, on my very first dive, while squeezing into the handling room of the aftermost 5" mount I inadvertently swatted an urchin hard, leaving my right hand feeling like someone had poured acid on it for the rest of the dive. Ouch!

Unfortunately, due to our unscheduled delay departing Makassar and Empress's other commitments, we could only stay on the wreck for a couple of days. On our last night on-site, as if giving us a taste of 'what might have been', an intense tropical storm came through with spectacular lightning strikes and



booming thunder, whipping up the sea and making it uncomfortable to sleep while at anchor. Thankfully by morning it was gone, leaving a glassy sea with a long rolling small swell for our last day of diving.

Diving my Mk15.5 closed circuit rebreather at such shallow depths as Amagiri lays was really a treat as I could conduct dives of two hours (or more) duration with less than 15 minutes of decompression! And it sure was a nice change diving where the actual bottom time of the dive itself was much longer than the subsequent decompression portion! But as they say "if you can't do the time, don't do the crime" so I shouldn't complain.

On the initial Amagiri discovery dives in October 2003 the group on board at the time had visibility of 20m/65ft or more, but because we were diving in the rainy season we had only about 12m/40ft or less at times. But for a pleasant change, the ambient light level on the wreck was quite high because of the reflective sandy bottom and currents on site were minimal, yet another treat. But, as is so often the case, just as we were getting very familiar with the intricacies of the wreck site it was time to leave, so an overnight steam brought us to the Kalimantan port of Balikpapan. From there my wife and I flew back to Bali and home to Australia. Empress continued on to her home port Singapore and, as it turned out, the very next day found several previously undiscovered/uncharted wrecks of large Japanese freighters or 'marus' sunk by US destroyers in the daring Battle Off Balikpapan raid in February 1942, giving me all the more reason to go back to explore this area again with Empress in the future!

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