

YAMASHIRO PROJECT : A DIARY

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The HIJMS Yamashiro was a proud battleship of the Imperial Japanese Navy during WWII. Flagship of the Vice-Admiral Nishimura, she was sunk at the same time than her sustermp HIJMS Fuso during the battle of Leyte.



1st Phase: Getting there...

July 13th, 14th and 15th 2006

Living in Thailand, the trip to the Philippines should be easy and relaxing, with only a 3-hour fly to Manilla. Unfortunately, things are never as planned. Some delays in the flight, a tropical storm nicely named "Florita" and some very bad sea conditions will make my day more interesting. Arrived in Manilla under strong rain showers, I quickly take the first taxi available to go to the ferry terminal. However it happens that the ferry going to Cebu Island has been cancelled till further notice. There will maybe one tomorrow, weather permitting. That's a bad start. With 80 kg of diving equipment, I don't exactly travel "light" and I genuinely rely on the advice of a taxi driver to find a hotel nearby. The only one proposed to me is a decent building in a quiet area but I suddenly realize, after having mentally fought with the exchange rate, that for the price I pay for my room, I would better have sponsored the college expenses for all the kids of ten villages in the Philippines. Too late, I already gave my credit card.

I spend the all night to re-configure my luggage, as I have a tendency to over-pack my carry-on luggage (over 32 kg, with my Meg). The worst time of my flights is when I have to smile while putting my hand luggage in the overhead compartment in front flight attendants always surprised to see the all plane tilting on one side.

I wake up rather confident in the future, as it's the 14th of July, the national day in France. Unfortunately the weather doesn't care and it's still raining in Manilla and some streets are flooded when I try to find a hardware store open at 7 o'clock in the morning. I just forgot to adjust my clock.



Time to take the ferry to Cebu and meet Bruce who is over there since two days to solve some logistical problems and enjoy the nightlife. Pim should also arrive tomorrow. I board on the ferry at 4:00PM and start waiting. As the 6 millions of people packed on the ferry, I'll have to wait till 9:00PM before the boat captain finds his keys and starts the engine. The meal is cold; people are angry and hang around every single part of the boat; passengers come from everywhere, speak every language on Earth and elsewhere; the ship looks like a scene in Star Wars. And the toilets already smell like the subway in Paris. The trip to Cebu is supposed to last 22 hours (it will take 38 hours!). Interesting journey on this floating wreck! I should maybe start to set up my rebreather in case of emergency.



In the middle of the night, a strange wake-up call. One of the stewards explains that the air-con system is gone crazy and the temperature is dropping to a chilly 10C in the cabin. Most of the passengers have the feeling that the boat is lost nearby the South Pole now. I don't care as my dry suit undergarment, a Thinsulate 200gr, makes a perfect pyjama for sub-zero environment.

After a disgusting breakfast made of cold corned beef and

rice that reminds me my time in the Navy, a boring day onboard starts. The opportunity to maintain my regulators and adjust some minor details in my equipment. Better than watching stupid TV shows in Tagalog or participating in the so popular Karaoke!

The boat crew is curious and helpful, so I can use some of their tools and drill new holes in my back-plate.

2nd Phase: Preparing the dives... July 16th and 17th 2006

Arriving in Cebu at 3 o'clock in the morning is clearly not the most exciting experience in my life, but it's even worse when you have to wait 3 more hours to be able to embark in the next ferry to Ormoc. That's where I finally meet Bruce and Pim who just wake up from a nice night sleeping in a comfortable hotel room. More luggage and more porters to carry them.

We finally arrive in Ormoc two hours later where Rob Lalumiere is waiting for us. This American citizen living in the Philippines since a few years. Diving being his hobby, a



hobby he is the only one to have in the area, he spent a lot of money to have the proper logistics to explore the thirty deep wrecks disseminated in Ormoc bay. Amongst then the USS Cooper where he made his record dive at 198m.

Rob is an extremely friendly guy with a lot of stories to share and a very convenient boat, all adapted to his needs as a technical diver. We have Oxygen, Helium, Air compressor, depth sounder, etc. Everything we need to dive the HIJMS Yamashiro and Fuso, South Leyte.



We just need a few minutes to cover the complete boat with the content of our bags: rebreathers, bail-out rebreathers, OC regulators, dry suits, Sofnolime, etc. The once-

a-nice-boat now looks like a flea market. The weather is nice and the sea calm.

After a breakfast more than welcome, we decide to pump the tanks. So we start hooking up the whip and the compressor and within 5 minutes, the sea and the rain start peaking up. Great.

We'll spend more than four hours to prepare all the tanks and equipment, most of the time under a constant rain, with the boat bouncing up and down close to the pier.

A fantastic dinner and a nice sleep easily clear up all the problems from the last few days.



Time to go to Hinundayan, South Leyte, a few miles from where both battleships sank in 1944. for our comfort, Rob has decided to go on his boat early in the morning (a long 12 hour trip) and we only leave by car at noon to join him later (only a 3 hour trip!). On the way, we stop to buy more buoys and ropes to build the decompression station. We also shop around to find some nice magazines and drinks to keep us busy and hydrated during the very long decompression stops.



3 hours to discuss again about the dive plans, the emergency procedures and the way to make the long deco in a strong current as pleasant as possible.

3rd Phase: Diving the Yamashiro July 18th to 20th 2006

After a long night to recover from the long (and extremely damaged) road to Hinundayan, we woke up at 6:00AM, ready to finally go diving. A quick untasty breakfast in a local restaurant and we start to load the rest of the equipment on the boat. While preparing and testing the rebreathers, we now have our support divers ready to help. The first one is Eveline Verdier, a Trimix Instructor Trainer. The second one is Ross Hemingway, the designer of the so-appreciated v-planner decompression software. Ross lives in the Philippines and comes for the day to help us. The opportunity to discuss about VPM, V-Planner and new features that would soon come...

A few more hours to finish to prepare everything while the boat already leaves to the dive site. The slack tide is at 10:30AM and our diving window is quite tight. Later than that, the current might be very strong.

Rob finds the wreck in a record time and everybody is so glad to see a big peak coming on the screen of the depth sounder. On a bottom of 198m, the shipwreck of the HIJMS Yamashiro shows a top depth of less than 176m. We all start to imagine some massive superstructures.



Unfortunately some final fine-tunings delay us and the tide already starts. The current peaks up very quickly and the weather deteriorates in a matter of minutes. Rain shower, waves and wind just replace the sun and calm sea we appreciated in the early morning. A strong 3 knot current in the opposite direction of a steady wind will decrease the chance to safely dive on the wreck today. No way to plan a 6 or 7 hour decompression in this conditions.

After a few attempts to moor up the boat, we quickly retreat to a protected bay where everybody enjoys a shallow dive on a muddy bottom. The Yamashiro is not ready to



be explored today. Different teams tried to dive the shipwreck and never succeeded. There is no reason why we should win this privilege on our first attempt! And it was a very useful day to check all the equipment, do some last-minute adjustments and be used to the boat and the local environment. And we spent the day eating crackers and candies, so nothing to complain about. Let's go back to sleep!

Different day, different story. The current is still very strong today, even at slack tide and after several attempts to hook the boat on the wreck, we decide to try another technique. The boat crew, always very helpful quickly makes a shotline with a weighted anchor (a standard anchor with two dumbbells strapped!) with almost 300 m of line and Styrofoam buoys. We drop the shotline on the wreck and the all line goes down very fast. I try to imagine the effect when it lands on the wreck... Anyway, our support diver Eveline, swims to buoys to remove the excess line. There is no slack. The current pushes everything so hard that it will be very difficult for her to set up the deco line with the stage tanks. Pim, Bruce and I start to gear up. A long process with the equipment we'll use: dry suit, rebreathers (Ouroboros for Pim, Inspiration for Bruce, Megalodon for me), bail-out tanks, etc...

The boat is very close to the shotline when I jump first in the water. Nevertheless I work very hard to reach it. Because of the waves, I decide to wait just below the surface while doing my equipment check. At the surface, Pim has a 1st stage regulator O-ring that blows up at the last minute. The all crew helps him to fix the reg but it's already too late. He decides to abort the dive.

Bruce, who had some problems with the Hammerhead, decided to switch back to the normal Inspiration electronics, therefore limited in depth. He will stop at 120m.

I descend along the shotline at a 45 degree angle. The only way to go down is to pull myself with the rope. That's the plan but it's quite a hard work. Several times I have to stop for a few seconds to catch my breaths. I'm quite happy to have a pre-production radial scrubber in my Meg. Such a heavy exertion at depth wouldn't be possible with the standard axial scrubber. It's a very different environment than a cave!

At 120m, a big thermocline and the temperature drops from a comfortable 29C to a chilly 22C. I still kick hard and pull on the rope. It becomes darker and the current doesn't decrease. I try to streamline myself as much as possible and the Sidemount kit definitely helps.

180m. The line is horizontal, 15m above the bottom. I follow the line and discover a huge hull in front of me. My Halcyon canister light has flooded and I have to use a 10W HID light. The beam is narrow and hardly covers more than a few metres. When I finally reach the wreck of the Yamashiro, I'm already 14 minutes into the dive. A quick check at my handsets and my computers and I start exploring the wreck. It's so dark and the wreck so huge that it's difficult to have any clue about where I am. I see superstructures, a hull and it looks like the complete wreck sits on her side. After a few minutes on the bottom, my VR3 and my tables strongly remind me that it's maybe the right time to start my ascent. Already!!

The current is still there, the line still almost horizontal and it takes quite a while to reach my first deco stop at 150m. When I pass the thermocline I start to relax and realize that the water is warm and the visibility excellent. I can see Bruce at a depth around 80m. I feel good like during any tropical recreational diving, but I'm still at 120m holding on a line that will be my best friend for the next six hours.



Slowly I pass all my deep stop before reaching the intermediate (longer) stops. Time to use my jon-line as my soft hands don't really like grasping the rope... Eveline is waiting for us at 40m. Pim will also act as a safety diver for this dive. He brings me a plastic bag with two drinks and FHM Magazine (the only magazine I found!). Eveline comes back from time to time to take some pictures. Everything looks fine, so far...



9m. The current is picking up full speed and I just turn and jump all over the place at the end of my jon-line. It's made in Thailand so I hope it will not break. I try to find a comfortable position but I start to notice that my solenoid doesn't inject any oxygen anymore. My oxygen tank is empty. Time to plug in my 11L of Nitrox 80. Easier to say than to do. I need one hand to keep my balance and the other two to disconnect the LP hose... okay it's connected now so I just have to maintain my setpoint manually at 1.3 for the next 3 hours. But suddenly I feel very buoyant... Looks like the Schrader valve that was double-(triple) checked leaks. The pO₂ is slowly rising and that's rather good for me as it automatically compensate for my O₂ consumption. The only problem is buoyancy control. I have to exhale out of the loop and lose quite a lot of gas. I try on the other manual injector (the diluent side) but it's the same story and every time is an acrobatic performance (I'd better have four hands).

I ascend to the next deco stops at 6 and 4.5m and buoyancy is even more a problem. I try to open and close the tank valve according to my needs but it soon becomes boring and I still have 2 hours of deco. After a while I become used to it. Just before that my tank was empty. Where is the so useful support diver? Just above my head,

at the surface, holding on the line because of the current. As I can't move as I don't want to spin around like a washing machine, I can't signal the support diver to bring me more oxygen. So I use push on the purge button of my bail-out regulator to have an impressive stream of bubbles hitting the surface. It works and a few seconds later, Eveline comes to ask what's going on. A few minutes later, she'll bring a wonderful 7L tank of oxygen.

I try to keep me busy. I count the jellyfishes carried by the current. All types, shapes, sizes and colour. But it becomes boring when I reach one million. So I try to play with the stupid game on the VR3. Designed for technical divers with an IQ point of 42. A look at the main screen: 200%CNS. Quite high! What did they say about oxygen toxicity and the effect on the brain cells? Maybe I'm not that far from the 42 IQ points.

The last ten minutes are obviously the worst. I look at my computer every 20 seconds. At 627 minutes into the dive, I have removed my jon-line and go up and down on the shotline, ready to surface. I want a very slow final ascent but I'm also very bored and cold. My dry suit is full of water...

I take my time to ascend and reach the surface in a place that looks like the middle of a storm. A lot of wind, big waves, beginning of the evening and a boat that tried to approach me and goes up and down. I normally prefer to rest at the surface for a few minutes before going back to the boat but not in these conditions. A support diver catches all my tanks and I try to find a safe way to the ladder. I feel tired and I appreciate that a crew member helps me to remove my fins to climb the ladder. As soon as I sit on the boat, everybody comes for the usual questions about the wreck and some congratulations. The first diver on the Yamashiro...

We head back to the hotel where the daily chicken-and-rice meal is waiting for us, just an hour before I fall asleep.

The following morning is full of hope for the other divers. Yesterday, we left the shotline on site so it will be easy to find the location of the wreck. But it looks like the sea is already rough a 7AM. Quite an early bird.

Nevertheless Pim and Bruce start to prepare their equipment, as I set up a twinset for me (as a support diver I dive Open Circuit today. First time since so many months). I prepare the bail-out tanks I will clip on the line.

When we reach the location of the wreck, no buoys in sight. Rob is quite surprised as no fisherman never comes here (too far from the coast), especially during the night. The shotline could have drifted so we check down current, even if it's very unlikely with 50kg on the bottom. Maybe the buoys have been sucked down by the current, also very unlikely because of their size.

After 40 minutes looking for the buoys, a quick discussion to decide about what we do. A second shotline is the back-up plan but will leave the boat with only a very small amount of rope. We come back to the wreck, as we drift very quickly every time we stop. The shotline is put in place and we come back to check if it's still on top of the wreck but with no explanation, the depth sounder shuts down. We change the batteries. Nothing. We double check all the connections. Nothing. All of a sudden, the screen displays an image of the bottom. We don't try to find an explanation. We're just happy like that.





We come back to the buoys but it looks like they have drifted. Actually the rope is loose... It looks like it has been cut off. No more shotline. And exactly at the same time, no more helm!!! There is something going wrong here. Now the boat cannot even head back to the coast. A stud that holds the rudder is broken. The crew members work hard to fix the problem with some tie-wraps and ropes (the last ones). The wind is blowing quite hard now and the sea looks white. We all look at each other like this place was doomed. We decide to go back home, even if it means a real frustration for Pim and Bruce.

Nevertheless when we reach the shore, the mood is quite good. We have done what we could to explore the Yamashiro. The spirit of survivors just opened a window to visit their final rest. This window is now close and we have to respect that. Believe it or not, there is no other explanation to all the problems that occurred in the last 4 hours.

In this trip we lost, broke or flooded:

- 1 Hammerhead for Inspiration
- 1 video camera and its housing
- 1 Halcyon canister light
- 1 Poseidon regulator
- 2 anchors
- 550m of ropes
- 10 buoys and containers
- 2 dumbbells
- 1 dry suit
- 1 rebreather



We also needed:

- 400kg of personal equipment
- 14 porters in various airports and ferry terminal
- 20kg of rice and chicken
- 54 Diet Coke and Pepsi Max

The tables we used were designed by V-Planner and ANDI-GAP, with a 5/75 diluent and a progressive setpoint (1.0 on the bottom increasing up to 1.3 during deco). They were backed-up with VR3-VPM computers.

We used and abused of:

- Rob Lalumiere's excellent boat and its crew in Ormoc, PI.
- our support divers: Eveline Verdier and Ross Hemingway
- our sponsors: OMS, ANDI, PSA, Cochran, Mermaid's Dive Center, V-Planner, Rebreather World, Golem Gear, GAP, Otter Dry Suits and Northern Diver.



Thanks to all of them.

