

The Discovery of the HMS Vestal,

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July 26th 1945, Off-shore the Island of Phuket, Thailand

Under the command of Vice-admiral H. T. C. Walker parts of the 7. British East-Asia-Fleet is cleaning the waters around Thailand's west coast from mines placed by the Japanese. The fleet consisted of two aircraft carriers, two cruisers, two destroyers and five Algerine class minesweepers: the HMS Plucky, HMS Rietelmann, HMS Pincher, HMS Squirrel and the HMS Vestal.

This day, however, only four minesweepers were still on duty. Two days earlier, on the evening of the 24th the HMS Squirrel was hit by a mine so badly, that it had to be given up. Since the vessel did not sink, the destroyer HMS Rotherham conducted the act of grace and sank it. Seven seamen lost their lives. Those who survived were rescued by the HMS Vestal and brought to the cruiser HMS Nelson.

In spite of this tragedy, the search for more mines was continued the following days – many were found and disarmed. On this day – the 26th of July 1945 - the work was especially risky as it took place very close to the island of Phuket under constant watch of the Japanese. Radar stations, fortifications and nests of machine guns on land could be determined from the boat by naked eye. However, they did not open fire as the minesweepers were accompanied by the heavily armed cruisers HMS Nelson and HMS Sussex. They would easily have resisted an attack from land immediately.

Around 6:25 pm – after dusk – there was a sudden alarm. Three not identifiable aircraft approached from over the hills of Phuket Island. Being close enough they were identified as hostile planes.

What happened now was hell. All vessels opened heavy fire – the peaceful night was filled with deafening noise. The leading plane was heading towards the HMS Sussex – it was obvious that it planned to crash on the cruiser. All heavy guns concentrated on aiming at this plane only and managed to destroy it only ten meters starboard of the vessel. More and more planes showed up in the sky and another one was flying toward the Sussex. Under heavy fire it turned off and now it looked like it was heading toward the HMS Plucky. However, it did not succeed in completing its mission. The plane turned toward the HMS Vestal which tried to defend itself with all available 4 inch guns but it was not able to stop the offensive. The Vestal was the pilot's target. With a huge cloud of fire and smoke and a deafening detonation the plane crashed on top of the vessel. Heavily hit and burning the Vestal immediately began to tilt to the side and sink. It was clear – the vessel was lost.

The crew received command to clear the ship and again the HMS Rotherham had the sad duty to sink the vessel. The kamikaze attack was over and the destroyer did its job – just like two days earlier – the first missiles were aimed at the target and hit the ammunition room. In a huge explosion the HMS Vestal sank to the bottom of the Indian Ocean, remaining the grave for twenty seamen.

What nobody knew at this point in time: the Vestal was the last vessel the British Royal Navy lost in World War II and it was the only ship lost in a kamikaze attack.

Due to the circumstances, the exact position could not be determined. Nobody knew exactly where the vessel may be found. And over time it was simply forgotten.

March 10th, 2002 – almost 47 years later

A small long tail boat is leaving the beach of Rawai. On board – next to the captain and an old Thai fisherman – are two men from Germany and a man from Great Britain. The two Germans, Andreas Donate and Joerg Zebisch have been working in Phuket as dive instructors the past two and a half years and since six months they are the owners of Deep Blue Divers, the first and until now only tech-dive-basis in Thailand. After having completed the organization and introduction of their business the past months, they started looking for new and interesting dive sites for their future clients around the island of Phuket, especially suited, qualified sites deep enough to conduct tech-diving. Their friend Adam Douglas, also living in Phuket, accompanied and supported the two young entrepreneurs.

Their destination today is a 70 meter deep area southwest of Phuket, not far from the southern most tip of the island. In the last months they had always heard rumours about undiscovered ship wrecks in the area. Especially stories about a Japanese destroyer caught their interest, and after a long search they managed to find an old Thai fisherman who could lead them to a place where a wreck could be suspected. Everyone was very sceptical; the fishermen only had his eyes and an area he had pointed to from the shore. And he did not have any navigation help with him. Also the box the old man carried with him – nobody knew what it contained – only made everyone look at each other with a face full of question marks. But since payment only after a successful trip was agreed, the whole situation was taken in a very relaxed manner.

After the team was already under way for half an hour and the boat was in open waters the fisherman gave the captain a signal to stop the boat. The group had reached the right location. And everyone was pretty speechless when the old man opened his box. He pulled out an old car battery, a monitor and a long item, which Adam had identified as a sonar device. Skilfully the battery was connected to the monitor; the sonar device was attached to an old steel rod und let into the water. The echo-sounder – a small technical wonder – allowed us to proceed with our search under water. After a few years in Phuket one had gotten used to unusual methods, but here the group was absolutely speechless. And then something happened nobody had expected – clear patterns could be seen on the monitor indicating an elevation on the normally flat surface of the sea. Even though the current was getting stronger, the anchor was thrown and the equipment was prepared for a deep dive with tri-mix tanks and deco gas premixed for the estimated depth. Slowly Joerg descended along the anchor line. Unfortunately the current let the boat drift away, and when Joerg, a former mine diver of the German marine forces, appeared at the surface after 83 minutes there were only disappointed faces. The current coming from the original location had made the search impossible.

A lot richer in experience and with an uncertainty about what was really found the journey back to Phuket was started, but not without clearly recording the details of the position in a GPS receiver. And with the intention to return to this place as soon as possible.

March 16th, 2002, six days later

With a large dive boat equipped with stationary sonar the team returned back to the location only six days later and began searching under water again. And the sonar reacted after a short period of time. Since the echo-sounder was of good quality the team decides to precisely record the size and exact location of the object. The result is something with a length between 60 and 80 meters, located at a depth of approximately 72 meters. The highest elevation is recorded at 64 meters.

The trimix carried on board was mixed for a maximum depth of 70 meters, and again Joerg descended along the rope. It is agreed that if a wreck is found a rope to mark the object is to be attached and a buoy is to be placed.

After the total time has elapsed and nothing was found the group was very disappointed. Andreas dives down to the deco stop and accompanies Joerg back to the surface. Actually expecting negative news from below, excitement becomes big when Joerg reports to have found a large ship-propeller and its main shaft. The excitement increases even more when Joerg describes the details of his discovery. Due to the propeller's diameter and the size of the shaft, Adam, an old seadog, concludes that it belongs to a ship with strong machinery and a fast-turning propeller, customary to warships. In any case, now there was proof that a larger wreck was existent here. And very satisfied with this result the team returns to its base

April 21st, 2002 – Five weeks later

More than four weeks pass by before there is a new opportunity to dive at the location. The objective this time is to find the wreck and, if possible, attach a rope with a buoy located 5-10 meters under the surface. Since Joerg cannot accomplish this alone, he is accompanied by Fabrice, the French manager of another dive school. And this time everything runs the way it should. Adam, responsible for the navigation, brings the divers to the exact spot. They fix the ropes and descend into the water. At a depth of 70 meters they immediately sight the wreck at the bottom of the Indian Ocean. The rope they took down is attached to the vessel with a steel chain and connected to an airbag which floats to the surface. Here Andreas and Adam are waiting rather impatiently with their buoy which is then tied to the rope at a depth of 10 meters. It was agreed not to leave a buoy at the surface, experience showed that the fishermen often cut ropes when driving by. After the two divers returned after 81 minutes there were only happy and content faces. Then Joerg revealed further details. He had detected ammunition at the end of the vessel where he had fastened the rope. The sensation was perfect. They had found the warship they were looking for. Before conducting a further dive, the team agrees to do some detailed research in old history books to clearly identify which vessel this may be. Further they plan to wait until Andreas has completed his deep dive instruction course, so he can join the group on the next dive. With his passion for under water photography he is chosen to take the first pictures of the wreck.

April 2002 until the Beginning of June 2002

The intensive research conducted in the following weeks, supported by Adam's unremitting efforts and help, lead to a result beating everyone's highest expectations. But one after the other.....

From the details brought to surface, it was clear the discovery must be a warship. First research determines that it must be either a Japanese or British vessel, other nations did not have fleets in these waters. And the fact that a ship really sank here could be confirmed by the Phuket people. However, no further clues and details could be found on the island, so the group started working through the military archives in the internet. After studying endless pages in the web, Adam finds the names of four vessels which could match with the discovery: two Japanese carriers, the Sumatru Maru, send to the bottom October 28th, 1944 by the HMS Trenchant and the Kainan Maru, which was hit by a British submarine torpedo December 6th, 1944. Further, for the first time Adam trips over the names of two British Algerine class minesweepers, both being part of the 7. British East-Asia fleet: the HMS Squirrel and the HMS Vestal.

In chronics of the British Royal Navy recordings are found about the operations of the 7. British Fleet in the waters around Phuket. Further, some comments lead to the Algerine Club whose members serviced aboard the various Algerine class warships.

Adam decides to contact them, hoping to receive some information which could lead him to further conclusions in identifying the wreck found.

At the same time, all available material about the vessels – especially the Squirrel and the Vestal - is studied and analyzed. While being busy with this material, Adam's further research revealed the exact location where the Japanese vessels had sunken. Due to the locations in other waters, they could be excluded from further investigation.

Objective of the next dive was to search for concrete clues and devices which could reveal the identity of a possibly British ship, as another sunken unknown Japanese wreck was also still suspected to be located in this area. July 8th, 2002 - the final breakthrough

In the afternoon of July 8th the Deep Blue Divers' team leaves for the fourth and most crucial dive trip.

Besides Adam, Joerg and Andreas a fourth diver is on board: Fred Evans, a former professional deep-sea diver from Scotland, has joined the team from Bangkok to supply additional support. After the buoy - left behind during the last journey – was found after a short search, Fred dives down first, as he has the longest diving profile. He is followed by Joerg and Andreas, carrying his underwater camera at such a depth for the first time. Even though the conditions were not optimal the first pictures of the wreck could be taken. Also, they return to the location where Joerg had noticed something looking like ammunition while attaching the rope during the last drive. While inspecting the area they discover various missiles and projectiles of a smaller gun. After a various doubts signalled by Joerg, Andreas decides to recover one of the missiles, hoping it would help the team to identify the gun it was used for and further determine the origin of the vessel. With extreme care, the object is wrapped and taken to the surface. On the way up they meet Fred who had recovered a pipe-like object which he had attached to his equipment. Back on the boat this item is identified as a missile of larger calibre which could fit to a medium-sized gun. The trip back seemed endlessly long.

After having returned to the base, the recovered items are cleaned and measured. Comparisons with available data about the two minesweepers give a match. The missiles fit exactly to the description of the weapons used on board. After more thorough cleaning, English inscriptions are detected on the bottom side of the missiles. After this discovery, a Japanese vessel was definitely out of question. It could now be concluded that one of the two British minesweepers was found. Even though nobody exactly knew that day which ship the group had discovered they returned to shore very satisfied and content.

July 12th, 2002 – the last dive

Already four days later the next dive was conducted, hoping to find a name to finally identify the wreck. But nothing really went smoothly that day. Maybe it was caused by Adam's absence, he was in England. Or the reason may have been the instable weather – the rainy season had already begun.

Even after intensive search for the surface buoy, which was connected to the buoy in 10 meters depth after the last visit to avoid intensive under water search, the location could not be found. Local fishermen had probably cut the rope.

Due to the high waves it was very difficult to place a new buoy to mark the location. While manoeuvring the dive boat the rope got tangled with the propeller and tore off. A reserve rope was let down with the help of several weights. Andreas and Joerg used it to start their dive.

At a depth of 71 meters they noticed that the weights had drifted off – there was no sight of the wreck. But the weights left a track in the sand. They followed the marks and the ship was found after seven minutes. However there was not enough time to find further clues to its identity. A few more pictures could be taken before the two had to return to the surface.

At the last stop at 4 meters they noticed that it had started to rain and the waves were very high. The dive boat to pick them up was not in sight. With increasing waves and a sight of less than 20 meters the situation began to get threatening. After never ending 25 minutes, the boat finally approached out of a dark misty cloud of rain. All were quite happy after having reached the port.

The decision was made to refrain from diving at the site until the rainy season was over. The group was very disappointed that the vessel still had not been identified. It was planned to advertise the new dive site within a large campaign, but this could not be conducted without the name of the vessel.

Mid July 2002 – the final identification is succeeds

After the rainy season had begun, Andreas returned to Germany and work at the dive base was confined at a limit. Most of the time one is condemned to doing nothing all day long or thinking about the next dive. In the middle of this period of absolute leisure the necessary conclusive indication is found.

Again Adam is continuing his endless efforts and research, remaining in constant contact with the Algerine Club. Through this club he receives the addresses of some of the surviving seamen of which one leads him to two eyewitness reports in the archives of the club.

In both reports more details are revealed about location and circumstances under which both the HMS Squirrel and the HMS Vestal had sunken. Here it was clearly stated that the Squirrel sank June 24th, 1945 far away from land, on open waters, hit by a mine and then destroyed by the HMS Rothenham. The HMS Vestal however was hit by a kamikaze plane near the island of Phuket. Details in the reports match with the wreck discovered at a depth of 72 meters. Now there was no further doubt. With certainty the wreck discovered is the HMS Vestal, minesweeper of the 7. British East Asia Fleet / East India Fleet and the last vessel the British Navy lost in World War II.

Cordially we would like to thank all those supporting us with the necessary research required to identify the wreck. A very special to our friend Adam Douglas, without his help we would never have identified the vessel.

Respecting the seamen who lost their lives during the kamikaze attack Deep Blue Divers will refrain from entering the wreck when diving to the site