



Diver swims over Japanese Light Type 95 HA-Go tank on wreck of *San Francisco Maru*

Text by Brandi Mueller
Photos by Brandi Mueller and Rob Clayton

Truk Lagoon (now known as Chuuk) plays host to what is usually considered the world's best wreck diving. World War II ships, planes, tanks, trucks, and military artifacts abound at recreational dive limits in Micronesia's calm, warm waters. The abundant marine life has transformed the former war vessels into stunningly beautiful artificial reefs.

With so many interesting wrecks, it can be hard to choose a favorite. But ask any wreck diver who has been to Chuuk and most likely they will tell you their favorite is the *San Francisco Maru*. The ship is popularly referred to as the "Million Dollar Wreck" because it was (and still is) chock-full of expensive cargo including tanks, trucks, mines, ammunition, aircraft bombs, torpedoes and depth charges.

The *San Francisco Maru* is also popular because of its depth. Sitting in the sand around 62m (205ft), the top deck is at 50m (165ft), and shallowest parts of the ship are the two masts at 32m (105ft). Most of the interesting cargo can be seen between 50m and 56m (170-185ft),



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The San Francisco Maru *of Chuuk Lagoon*

putting the wreck technically out of recommended dive depths for recreational divers.

That being said, local dive operators

will lead small groups for dives with short bottom times (and short deco times) while carrying extra air and staging tanks throughout the dive in case of emergen-

cies. With good visibility and little current, the dive has relatively easy diving conditions other than depth, often being the deepest dive most recreational divers

have ever done. For trained tech divers, the ship is a fantastic tech dive with plenty to explore and makes for a great training technical dive as well.





Blue water, white sand and palm trees make up the paradise that is Chuuk. (right); Type 95 light tank—an early model of the HA-Go (lower right)

The ship

The *San Francisco Maru* was built in 1919 to join a fleet of over 50 identical cargo ships owned by Yamashita Kisen K. K. that were involved in world trade. It was commissioned into the Japanese Imperial Navy during WWII and was used to transport war materials between Japan and its Pacific Island territories and occupied islands. The freighter was 117m (385ft) long with an 8m (27ft) beam and 5,831 gross tons. Prior to arriving in Truk, the *San Francisco Maru* suffered damage from an attack at Wewak, New Guinea, on 4 May 1943. From there, it went to Inoshima docks for repairs. The ship arrived in Truk on 5 February 1944.

Operation Hailstone

As of 1944, Truk was a territory of the Japanese and an important operations base for the Japanese Combine Fleet. On 16 to 18 February 1944, the United States launched a massive naval air



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and surface attack on Truk. Known as *Operation Hailstone* by the United States and *Torakku-tō Kōshō* (the air-strike on Truk Island) by the Japanese; the US military invaded Truk with forces that included five fleet carriers, four light carriers and over 500 planes.

Prior to the attack the Japanese realized the vulnerability of having so much of their fleet in one place. Just a week before *Operation Hailstone* they relocated many of their aircraft carriers, battleships and heavy cruisers to Palau. Despite this action, the United States' attack by air, ship and submarine seemed to have taken Japan by surprise, and *Operation Hailstone* sank

three Japanese light cruisers, four destroyers, three auxiliary cruisers, two submarine tenders, three other warships and 32 merchant ships.

Over 250 Japanese aircraft were destroyed, most of which were on the ground being assembled having just arrived in cargo ships still in pieces. The United States lost only 25 aircraft, and the attack crippled Japanese forces.

The *San Francisco Maru* had arrived in Truk on 5 February 1944 and stayed even when its convoy sailed on 12 February 1944. The ship was shown in a photograph to be anchored southeast of Dublon Island in the 4th Fleet Anchorage (just east of Eten Island) on 17



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February 1944.

The 4th Fleet Anchorage was attacked on Feb 17, but the *San Francisco Maru* did not appear to be harmed on the first days of the air strike. But on 18 February 1944, a TBF Avenger from the USS *Essex*—an amphibious assault ship—dropped a 500-pound bomb



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A diver explores Hold #2 and swims over one of the trucks stored there



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The 75mm (3-inch) bow gun on the *San Francisco Maru* (above); A diver descends down the forward mast of the wreck (right)

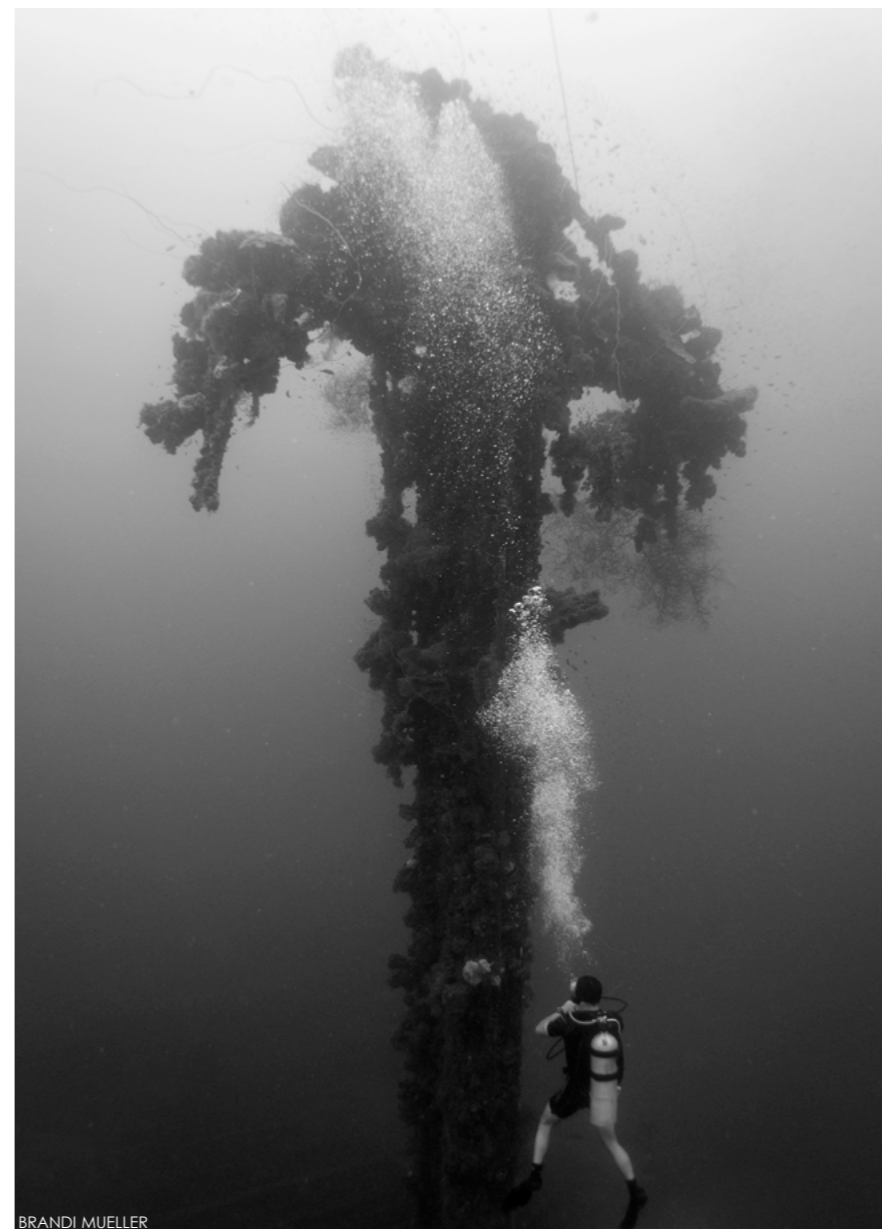
that hit midship, starting a large fire. The ship was seen devoured in smoke and flames, and it sank stern first. Five members of the crew were lost.

The dive

The first report of finding the *San Francisco Maru* underwater came from Cousteau's Truk Expedition in 1969, but it was not dived again until 1973 when a group of Kwajalein-based divers re-discovered it. They identified it by the ship's bell and the name etched on the side of the bridge superstructure.

Since then the *San Francisco Maru* has become a very popular dive, even with (or maybe because of) its depth. The ship rests upright in the sand at around 62m (205ft) in a relatively calm area with good visibility. Liveboards and day boats moor to one of two mooring balls connected to the wreck, which allow divers to follow the lines down to the ship.

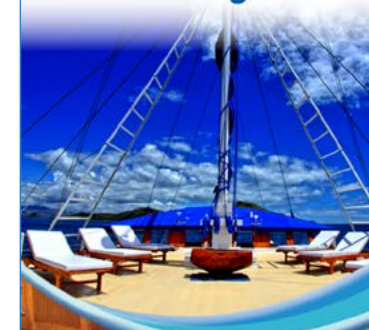
Divers descend into the blue and usually cannot see any part of the wreck for the first 15m (50ft). The first view of the ship is usually one of the



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two large, intact masts.

Continuing to descend down the forward mast, divers will notice this ship has very little marine growth on the wreck in

comparison to the other wrecks. This is most likely because of its depth and has left the ship still looking very much "ship-like" as it did over 75 years ago instead



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View of bow of wreck from flatbed truck stored on starboard side of main deck

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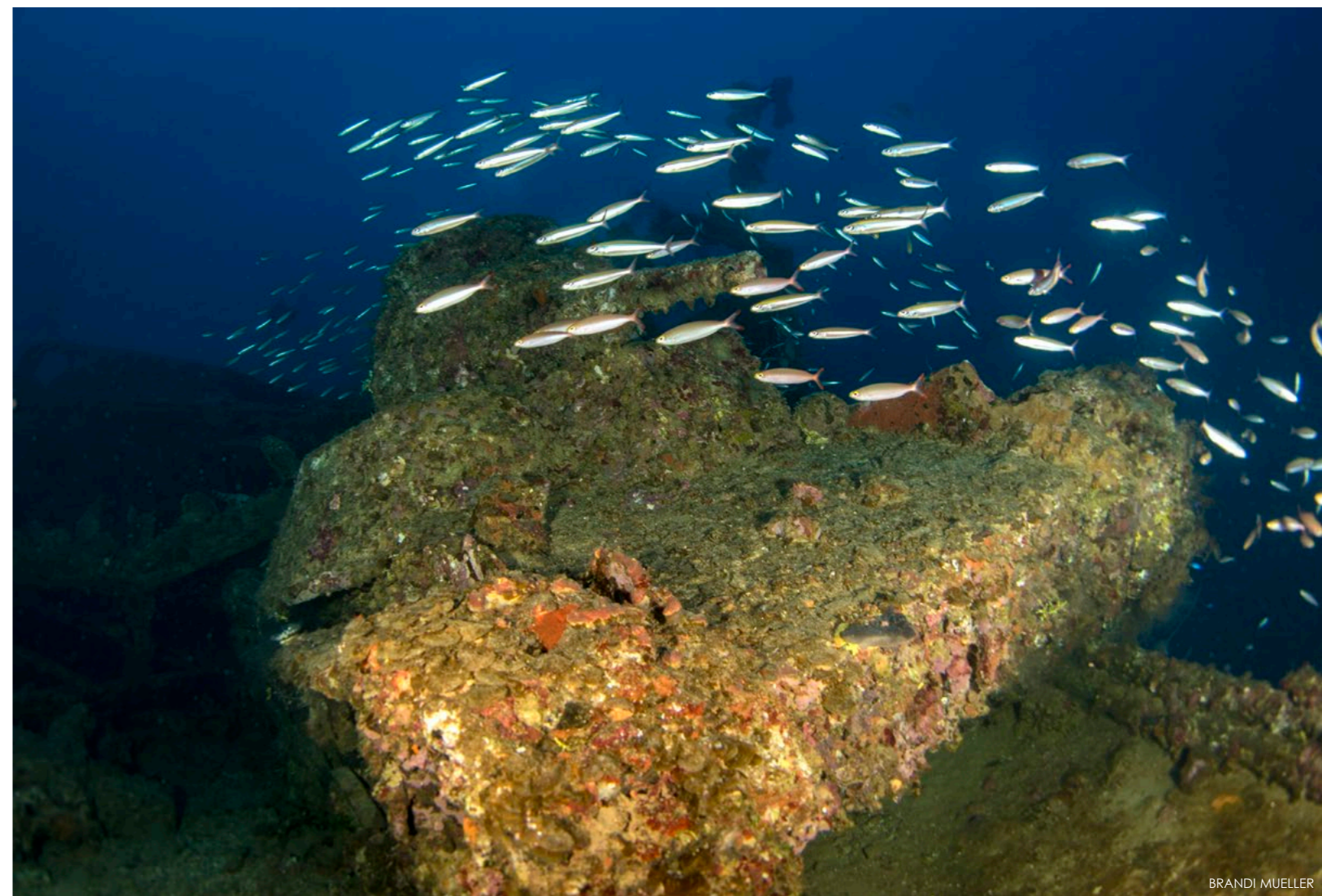
Next to the two tanks on the starboard deck is a 1.5 ton 4x2 Isuzu Type 94 flatbed truck also on the ship's main deck. The tanks and the truck are just above hold #2, which contains two more partially collapsed trucks resting on the upper tween decks. Below

them fuel drums, ammunition and aircraft bombs can be seen.

Moving forward towards the bow, hold #1 is worth checking out because it is filled with mines. Sadly many have been removed by the locals to be stripped of the high explosive gunpowder and used in dynamite-style fishing.

Those that remain are a unique sight and a highlight of the dive. Hold #1 also contains crates filled with detonators and large coils of cable.

At the bow is a 75mm (3-inch) bow gun that points off the port side. Mounted on a platform with very little growth, it looks as



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Japanese Light Type 95 HA-Go tank on *San Francisco Maru* (above); Mines on the wreck (top left)





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Kids paddle from island to island in homemade canoe (above); The MV *Truk Odyssey* (left)



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to have been tossed around, also probably due to the bomb impact or the sinking. There are also depth charges, anti-aircraft ammunition, shells and mines.

if it could still be used today if necessary. By swimming just a little off the port side of the bow divers can see (or swim to) a large steamroller sitting in the sand at 62m (205ft). It likely fell off the ship during impact.

Most divers, especially non-tech divers, divide the ship into at least two dives and tackle the stern portion of the wreck in a second dive.

Moving towards the aft of the ship, damage from the 500-pound bomb that hit the aft superstructure is visible around midship. Hold #4 has torpedoes stacked as well as single torpedoes that appear

there used to be lantern storage in one of the doghouses, which has collapsed, so several lanterns in various conditions have been placed on the deck.

Throughout the ship divers can also find non-weaponry artifacts including cups and saucers with the markings of the ship's owners and other china. Beer bottles, cooking utensils, medicine bottles, binoculars and more can also be found.

Afurtherthoughts

Overall, the *San Francisco Maru* is in considerably good

shape, bearing in mind it has been underwater since 1944. Its depth has prohibited some of Micronesia's prolific marine life from growing on the ship, leaving it very much how it looked when it originally sank. Due to its depth and that there is so much to see, the ship is best explored in several dives or as a technical decompression dive by those trained to do so.

When diving the *San Francisco Maru* be sure to take into consideration one's personal training and limits, and give adequate time to plan the dive and carry out that plan underwater. With the extensive ordinance on the ship, be careful not to disturb it and be aware of narcosis and decompression, which can both play a role on this dive.

The *San Francisco Maru*, also known as the "Million Dollar Wreck", is one not to be missed while diving in Chuuk. Any diver will be thrilled having seen tanks, trucks, mines,

depth charges and torpedoes all on one dive while also potentially breaking their own personal dive depth records.

On 29 March 2015, the last day of my trip, Typhoon Maysak directly hit Chuuk and did considerable damage to the islands. Please keep the people of Chuuk in your thoughts as they recover and rebuild from this natural disaster that has caused considerable damage to their island, as well as those in other places affected by Maysak. □

REFERENCE: *World War II Wrecks of the Truk Lagoon*, by Dan E. Balley

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Sitting on the starboard side of the main deck next to hold #2 is a 1.5 ton 4x2 Isuzu Type 94 flatbed truck that still has its steering wheel



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Two Japanese Light Type 95 HA-Go tanks stacked on top of one another on the starboard side of the *San Francisco Maru*



400-year-old cannons from Spanish armada found off Irish coast

A number of cannons, timbers and an anchor from *La Juliana*, one of three ships from the Spanish Armada wrecked off the coastline in 1588, have been recovered by divers for Ireland's heritage ministry.

The Spanish Armada was a Spanish fleet of 130 ships that sailed from A Coruña in August 1588, under the command of the Duke of Medina Sidonia, with the purpose of escorting an army from Flanders to invade England. But a combination of mistakes, poor planning and attacks by the English navy resulted in the Spanish fleet being scattered in the English Channel and fleeing up the east coast of England, forcing the fleet to go the long way around the British Isles in order to return to Spain. However, a severe storm in the North Atlantic caused many of the beleaguered Spanish ships to sink off Scotland and the west coast of Ireland.

Heavy storms over the past two years are thought to have uncov-

ered the 16th century vessel, long buried in the sandy sea bed off the coast of Streedagh, in County Sligo. Two other Spanish Armada ships, *La Lavia* and *Santa Maria de Vision*, also shipwrecked in the area, and more than 1,000 people lost their lives.

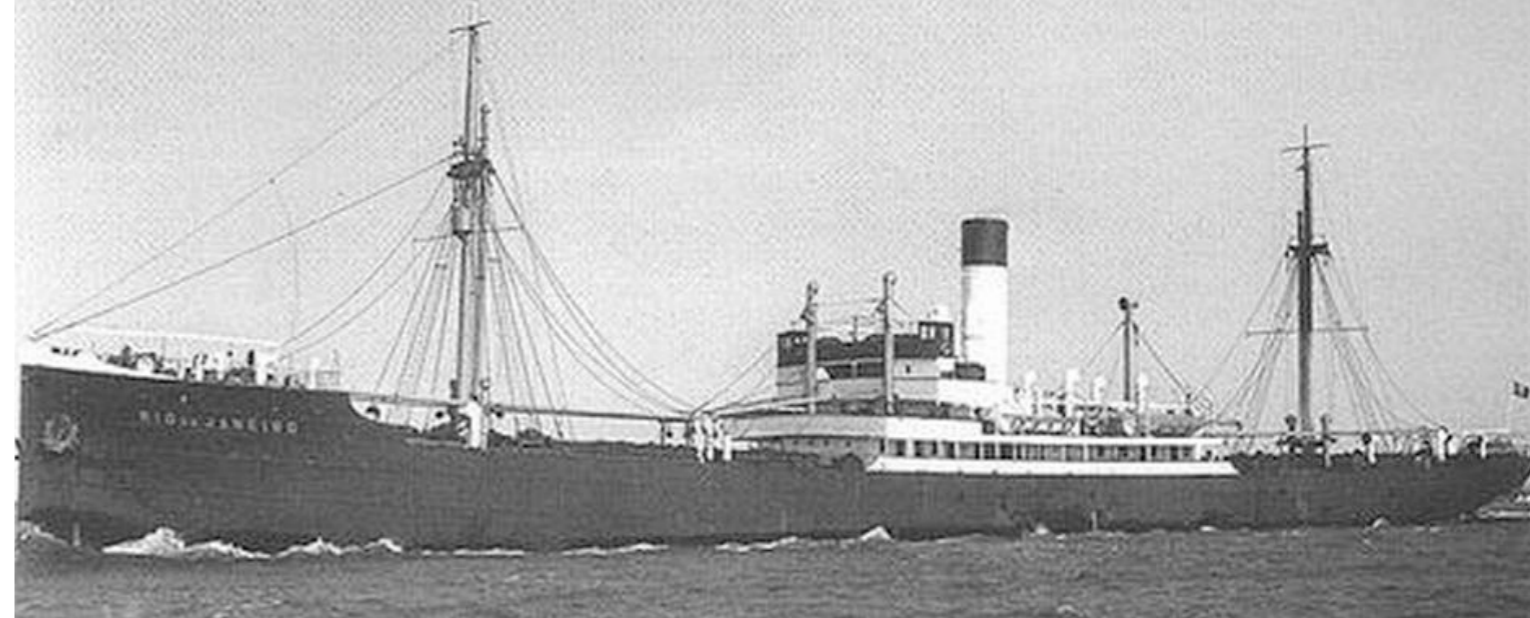
"On current evidence, the other two wreck sites remain buried beneath a protective layer of sand, but the wreck of *La Juliana* is now partly exposed on the seabed along with some of its guns and other wreck material," Heather Humphreys, minister for Ireland's Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, stated in a press release. "We have uncovered a wealth of fascinating and highly significant material, which is more than 425 years old. The National Monuments Service believes that all of

the material has come from *La Juliana*, one of the three Armada ships wrecked off this coastline in 1588.

"This material is obviously very historically and archaeologically significant. My department's priority is to safely recover the artefacts, so they can be conserved and safeguarded by the National Museum, whilst at the same time also recording the wider wreck site.

"My department is now working with the National Museum to devise a strategy to safeguard and manage the site and in particular the remains of *La Juliana*. The Gardaí will continue to monitor the site as this work is carried out."

■ SOURCE: ARTS, HERITAGE AND THE GAELTACHT



MS Rio de Janeiro

Wreck of a WWII German troop transport located off Norway

Some 75 years after it was sunk by a Polish submarine on 8 April 1940, a Norwegian team has located the wreck of *Rio de Janeiro* at a depth of 135m near the town of Lillesand in Southern Norway, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporations (NRK) reports.

At the time of its sinking *Rio de Janeiro* was carrying a contingent of German soldiers meant for the invasion of Norway, which occurred on the following day, 9 April 1940. Of the 380 onboard, 50 were crew, the rest were soldiers. Of these numbers, almost 200 lost their lives, but 183 survived and were helped by the locals. Survivors told officials they were heading to Bergen, and even though they were wearing military uniforms, the Norwegian government failed to realize that a German invasion was imminent.

"We all went quiet"

"The biggest moment came when we went up along the bow until we could get an overview of the ship. That's when we all went quiet," said Vidar Johannesen from Agder-Tech AS, a commercial enterprise, which together with Adykk—a dive center locat-

ed in Kristiansand—has been responsible for the operation, after a six-year search for the wreck.

"We had an idea about which ship it was, so we were looking for anything that could identify the wreck," Tom Lundal, CEO of Adykk, told the NRK.

There was a lot of wreckage strewn across the seabed, wherein which the starboard lantern was found and retrieved. The lantern was imprinted with a serial number, which along with the size of the ships' outline and its contents, left no doubt about the ship's identity.

The Norwegian receiver of wrecks stated to the NRK that the ship is considered a gravesite, which

is not to be disturbed. However, it has been authorized that *Rio de Janeiro's* ship bell can be recovered and put on exhibit. ■

SOURCE: NRK

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