

Wreck Explorers Plumb the Mysteries of a Sunken Ocean Liner

Off the Beaten Track in the South China Sea: The Shipwreck *D'Artagnan*

By Dave Ross



Courtesy of Philippe Ramona

MV *D'Artagnan* in Marseille ca. 1938

While patrolling the Manila-Singapore shipping lanes on 22 February 1944, at 07.20, Lt. Cdr. Frank G. Selby sighted masts and smoke some fifteen miles from his submarine, the *USS Puffer*: an eastbound convoy moving at seven knots.

Unwilling to engage the ships in shallow water, he decided to

steam at high speed on the surface to the north of Subi Besar, from where he would swing south to intercept them in deeper water, free of shoals and navigational hazards. He hoped to catch them at the exit of the Koti passage, where he calculated he had thirty to thirty-seven fathoms of water to work with.

At 15.45, with three hours of daylight remaining, Selby picked

up two marks: a two-stack camouflaged transport ship and what appeared to be a small destroyer in escort, zigzagging at six-minute intervals. This was not the convoy he had been tracking that morning, but a much bigger ship isolated from its own main convoy, moving west. He decided to ignore his morning targets and go for the big game.

Selby's plan was to fire four torpedoes set to run at a depth of twelve feet at the transport, and two set at a depth of six feet at the escort. However, the maneuvers of the ships were such that it took him until 17.04 to bring his stern tubes to bear. Four torpedoes raced away, and he swung his craft sharply to port to bring his bow tubes into firing position. At 17.06.16 and 17.06.28, respectively, he heard two explosions: one was observed about midway between the transport ship's bow and the forward stack; the other was unseen but believed to be near the stern, both portside.

Through his periscope, Selby observed the ship now almost dead in the water, listing ten degrees to port and veering gently, its steering gone. The *USS Puffer* closed in and began taking pictures as the escort, though undamaged, fled, without making any attempt to set depth-charges. Selby watched as lifeboats were lowered and netting was thrown over the side, as those on board abandoned ship. Men in white (either fatigues or underwear) were seen in the boats. As the scene unfolded, it became clear that the ship would not sink from the damage it had sustained thus far; in fact, some believed that a propeller had again begun to turn. At 17.24, the *Puffer* delivered the mortal blows, firing her #1 and #2 tubes at the ship and striking a quarter-length in from the bow and stern respectively. The transport now began to roll to port and settle quickly by her stern.

Selby estimated the transport ship's length to be 520 to 530 feet (it was in fact 570 feet/172 meters) with a weight of at least ten thousand tons; he suspected she was one of the American or European ships captured early in the war by the Japanese. Too late to get close enough to make out the name on the bow, he observed nine or ten characters, but with no sign of the Japanese word MARU to be seen. At 17.35, the transport slipped below the surface, its location given as 03°10'N, 109°15'E, where it would remain unseen by human eyes for the next fifty-eight years.

After the war, the *Puffer* was credited with sinking the Japanese troop transport *Teiko Maru*, a 20,323-ton displacement ship, which Selby had rightly guessed had started life as the French liner *Le D'Artagnan*. Built in 1924, she was a member of the huge Messageries Maritimes Fleet, calling at ports from Europe, through South Africa and Madagascar, to Indochina, Australia and New Zealand. The advent of World War II saw the fleet split between the Allies and Vichy France; the *D'Artagnan* went to Vichy forces until she was captured by the Japanese in 1942. Her life ended on that February day en route from Manila to Singapore, when she encountered the Gato Class Submarine



Attack on the MV Teiko Maru seen from the USS Puffer

USS Puffer off of North West Borneo. She took down with her 199 Japanese soldiers who were believed to have been bound for shore leave.

The ship's rediscovery is credited to Vidar Skoglie of the *MV Empress*, who for over a decade has cruised Malay and Indonesian waters in search of wrecks; he is credited with hundreds of shipwreck discoveries. He found *D'Artagnan* on 7 July 2002, and has visited her briefly on technical charters about once a year since. The distance of some 350 miles from home base in Singapore, and the 240-foot (72-meter) depth to seabed, keep the numbers of visitors down; hence, there are still many things to discover on this marvelous dive site.

This past April saw a longer visit by an Asia Pacific-based team of divers (Steve Cox, Andy Dyer, Nicolas LeClerc, Martin Lorenzo, Jerry Mobbs and Chris Ross) organized by Underwater Exploration Productions (UEP), whose goal was to more fully explore and film as much as possible of *Le D'Artagnan* in High Definition. The vessel chartered was, of course, the *MV Empress*. Vidar's long-standing GPS ban seems to have worked well, keeping the exact location of the wreck known only to himself. The boat is well set up for technical charters, providing storage for over sixty gas bottles, continuous blending capability, a Haskel, plus an excellent lift for exiting the water. That said, it still required a very coordinated effort to bring the rest of the equipment needed to ensure a smooth job. Hats off to Nicolas LeClerc for his role; his Singapore apartment appears better stocked than most technical diving facilities even when he's the only one occupying it, but once it assumed the role of UEP base camp ...

All the 104s on the island were claimed; when these ran out, twin 18s, Luxfers, good valves and rigging got freighted in from Manila. Spare scooters appeared, burn tests were done, and a cooperative effort brought together a spares and tools inventory to coax anything from a wrist seal to a reed switch back to life while hundreds of miles out of FedEx range. To the credit of all concerned, the pre-dive work went flawlessly, and by midnight April 1, an excited group of divers were clearing Customs and bound for the South China Sea.



The first day saw a couple of shakedown dives on a freighter known as Target Wreck, and then an overnight steam took us to the large (2,700-ton) Japanese destroyer *Shimotsuki*. Fascinating dive though she makes, another overnighter direct to *D'Artagnan* was voted on. Arriving mid-morning on the 4th, with anchor down and a descent line secured, we had our first opportunity to look over the wreck. Historic photos show a majestic ship, but the ravages of war and more than half a century of submersion have altered her immeasurably.

The ship lies between 180 and 240 feet (fifty-five to seventy-two meters), listing about sixty-five degrees to port, shrouded in netting, and just below a thermocline that dropped visibility on the first days to about fifteen feet (five meters). Much of the superstructure, formerly the lounges and first- and second-class accommodations, has collapsed into a confused mass of twisted metal. Given the ship's great size and initially limited visibility, first-dive impressions were those of viewing isolated pieces of a large jigsaw puzzle. I am sure many experienced the feeling of jumping in on a new wreck filled with anticipation-fuelled, grandiose plans for the engine room, only to surface with a sense of "Yeah...I think that might have been the bow..." Such is human nature. But after taking a step back and adjusting expectations and letting the knowledge of the ship grow over a couple of dives, a natural momentum, and the excitement it brings about the next dive, always starts to build. Following every dive, the teams emerged with clearer stories and a greater affinity for the wreck. The pieces of the puzzle started coming together.

Prior to this project, two gentlemen very kindly volunteered us invaluable information. Craig MacDonald, whose father served on the *USS Puffer*, fleshed out the historical background to the attack using extracts from his manuscript *Be Lucky: The History of the Submarine USS Puffer*, which contained photographs originally sourced from the estate of Lt. Cdr. Frank Golay. Philippe Ramona sent us some superb images and deck plans, which were of tremendous help in planning and navigating the wreck. Both men had a keen interest in the current condition of the wreck, and our dives were executed with the purpose of bringing them up-to-date very much in mind.

The general deterioration of the upper decks was pronounced, but artifacts like brass cabin fixtures and bathroom fittings are still identifiable amongst the collapsing plating; we were able to correlate these with Philippe's photographs of the interior of the ship in her life as a liner. The Japanese obviously made no effort to refit her for troop transport, and thus everything was kept very much in its original form. Ornate French crockery still lies alongside Japanese rifle munitions.

The starboard side of the ship's hull shows areas devoid of any hull plating, presumably blown off by internal pressures caused by the sinking. These areas provide relatively easy interior access. From the point of tie-in, near the remains of the bridge, to the stern was almost a five-minute scooter ride. Little wonder that previous swim divers had never reported the presence of the props. The one visible screw, at 235 feet (71 meters), is in such a position that were it turning, it would strike the rudder. This confirms Cdr. Selby's observation of the stricken ship losing steering control.



Underwater Exploration Productions

Steve Cox and Nicolas LeClerc descend

Quite possibly his second torpedo, presumed to have struck the stern, was what effectively crippled the ship.

Persistence with entry points eventually paid off on the last day. Bulkhead collapse, deep silt and bird's-nests of wiring had dead-ended many a pathway. Finally, after navigating passageways as deep as 245 feet (75 meters), two men put a line into the boiler rooms from an access point toward the stern. The ship's bow was within easier reach and the starboard anchor still in place, but the ship's name was no longer discernible. Vidar had no recollection of anyone reporting the port anchor, so three divers went on a hunt, and found it laying isolated on the sea bed, draped with a decaying trawl net.

As the days passed and visibility improved, new individual discoveries gave rise to a strong impression amongst divers that this was indeed a classic wreck: by no means easy, but infinitely rewarding. Rather than transit home and dive along the way, a unanimous call was made to stay put on *D'Artagnan* until the last possible diving moment, with nothing more than a pit stop for a dive on the *Campanilla* just out of Singapore. Weighing anchor and heading west, it was unspoken but obvious that everyone's reflections were on how they could next elude their offices and return to this tremendous site. So many wrecks, so little time ...

REFERENCES

- Philippe Ramona. <http://www.es-conseil.fr/pramona/d'artag.htm>
- Craig McDonald. *Be Lucky: The History of the Submarine USS Puffer* (unpublished)