

Greece is often disregarded as a tech-diving destination (apart from HMHS Britannic), but the recent discovery of a new wreck site may well change this misconception. My story begins in Malta, where I briefly met Athens-based Marinos Giourgas during a visit to Techwise at St Julian's. Marinos was working for the busy dive centre while I was writing a feature on the World War Two German Schnellboot. A year later, out of the blue, Marinos contacted me regarding a project off Rhodes. Alan Whitehead, the owner of Techwise, was also supposed to join us, but work obligations - and a few choice words from his other half, Viv - reduced the 'three amigos' to the more aptly named 'desperate duo'. With help from locals, Marinos had discovered a new plane wreck near Lindos lying at a depth of around 70m. Although the plane had been seen via a video link, no one had physically been underwater to check out the site. Being the first divers to explore a new wreck definitely perked up my interest, as did the fact it was a plane, and probably of German World War Two origin.

Marinos picked me up from Rhodes airport via a local flight from my hometown Bournemouth. Marinos had recently set up the tech wing of Waterhoppers, the most-established dive PADI IDC centre on the island, run by CD Lee O'Flynn. This was the first-ever trimix facility to open on Rhodes. We made plans for two dives at the new wreck site. Dive one would be a recce mission just to find the plane, see what was there, orientate ourselves and check out the best picture opportunities. Then we would return several days later for Dive two, take the pictures including possible front covers and look for a way inside the fuselage to see what the plane was carrying. I had visions of finding a Luger pistol or a German helmet, but there could also be grenades and other explosive ordinance lying about, so we had to be extremely careful.

Altogether we were using four cylinders each. This comprised of a 17/45 back gas with a transition mix of 30/20 and a 72 percent deco. For a 20-minute bottom time, our total in-water time would be around one hour and ten minutes. The planned max depth of 70m turned out to be about 75m due to the tail lying slightly deeper than anticipated. Full tech kit hire is available from Marinos. The Apeks regs, wing and twinset I borrowed were in almost-new condition.

The plane wreck is located in Vlichia Bay, close to Lindos. If I was booking hotel accommodation, this area would probably be my first choice, as it's central to all the best dive spots. Lindos seemed to be 3 or 4 degrees C hotter than Rhodes

Town. Maybe the steep-sided cliffs somehow retained the heat? Someone had the bright idea of opening an ice bar close by, which I thought was a very shrewd business move. Marinos drove the van down to the water's edge. The sweat was pouring off me as we unloaded the cylinders. The wooden boat jetty doubled up as a venue for weddings and they were making arrangements for a ceremony that very afternoon. The horseshoe-shaped bay overlooked by the Temple of Athena made a very picturesque outlook, but giving vows in 40 degree C heat didn't seem like fun to me.

Marinos had already mounted three expeditions to find the wreck. The first, with a side-scan sonar, gave him a number of possible targets. His second venture was the first diving attempt with Alan from Techwise, but they didn't find the plane. The third outing was using a remote camera operated from the surface. The video footage at least confirmed the plane was down there, and it looked to be a German World War Two Junkers Ju-52. I would be try number four.

Although we had dived the previous day at a nearby cave site, Marinos still didn't really know my capabilities or how I would react. For extra safety, he had brought along three extra divers to wait for us at certain depths carrying spare cylinders. Goran and Colin worked for Waterhoppers, and Thomas was a friend from the port police. The shotline had been prepared slightly too short, so bounced over the seabed. When we eventually made our descent, the wreck was right at the limit of our visibility.

I could just make out a dark shadow lying on the sand about 15-20 metres away. I looked at Marinos and gave him a high five - we had found the wreck. As we got closer, the plane's distinctive corrugated outer skin confirmed it was a Junkers Ju-52 three-engined transport plane. The Ju-52 played ▶

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

TO BOLDLY GO...

Stuart Philpott dusted off his tech-diving kit to venture 75m down off the coast of Rhodes in Greece to investigate the sunken remains of a German World War Two airplane

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STUART PHILPOTT

“ Our Ju-52 didn't have any bullet holes on the wings or on the fuselage, so it's unlikely that the plane was shot down by Allied fighters ”



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a variety of roles in the German Luftwaffe from medium-range bomber to carrying equipment and paratroopers. Hitler even had his own personal VIP Ju-52. The cockpit and front radial BMW 132 engine had sheared off, otherwise the 19-metre-long plane with a 29-metre wingspan was fully intact, lying upright and undisturbed. The plane most probably ditched nose first. The force of impact must have ripped the front engine from its mountings and smashed out the cockpit glass.

I'm not sure if the crew would have survived? All of the rectangular windows in the fuselage bar one were completely blown out. The doors and roof escape hatch were still closed, so if anyone had been inside the fuselage it's unlikely they got out alive. The plane lies nose facing towards the airfield, which would imply the plane was coming in to land when it crash landed.

The massive tail section was completely intact. There had to be a swastika on the tail fin, but 70 year's worth of algae growth had obliterated any signs. We tried to scrub off the algae with a cloth but the stuff wouldn't budge. In hindsight, we probably should have used a wire brush, but I was worried that this would damage the underlying paintwork.

Both of the wing-mounted engines were in good condition. The twin-bladed props were completely intact and in the vertical position. Again, it's only guesswork but maybe they weren't rotating when the plane crashed, so could the plane have run out of fuel? The centre engine was missing. I could see a lump of twisted metal lying on the seabed 15-20 metres away on the starboard side, which may well have been the engine, but I didn't have time to investigate further. The deco clock was ticking, so we made our way to the shotline and began the long haul back to the surface.

The World War Two airstrip situated close by at Kalathos, also known as Gadura (the name of the river) or Calador, was originally occupied by the Italians until 1943 when they switched allegiance to the Allies. This provoked an assault from overwhelming German forces who regained control until the end of the war. There were no concrete aeroplane hangars visible, they had mainly used portable tents. When the airfield was bombed by the Allies, there was very little damage to repair so they could become operational again very quickly. Over the years, the old airfield had reverted back to an olive grove. On the long drive back from Lindos, we made a detour to explore the remains. I could just about see the outline of a concrete runway. We found a few of the old buildings, the most prominent being the control tower (there was a compass rose still visible in the roof), a sentry box, bunkers, air vents and a number of ladders leading down to an underground complex. During the war there was a daring British Commando raid mounted on the airfield codenamed Operation Chopper. The elite squad blew up a number of planes and escaped unseen without a single casualty.



Checking out the cockpit

“ I was so intent on looking around for the wreck I didn't think to look below me and nearly put my feet straight into the cockpit! ”

I split my seven-day trip between Mango Rooms and the four-star Semiramis Hotel. With regards to age and character, they were total opposites. The Semiramis was ultra-modern, 120 rooms, swimming pool, bar and restaurant located along the seafront, whereas Mango Rooms turned out to be a small family run B&B owned by PADI Divemaster Dimitris, with bar and restaurant in the middle of Rhodes Old Town. Both rooms were clean and tidy with modern bathrooms and air-con. The only negative with Rhodes Old Town was the labyrinth of cobbled streets, all with Greek names, which meant I got lost every day. But this was definitely the place to visit in the evenings, with a huge variety of bars, restaurants and shops to mooch around.

I searched the internet looking for more information on Ju-52 squadrons operating from Rhodes. Records indicated that a Ju-52 crashed landed on Rhodes in January 1941, killing Major Helmut Frohne and three others. But the information didn't exactly pin down Kalathos as the crash site. I found another mention of two Ju-52s shot down by Blenheims as they were coming in to land sometime during 1944. One of the Blenheims was also shot down by a Messerschmitt BF109, so there may well be other plane wrecks lying close to our Ju-52. Marinos said the seabed ▶



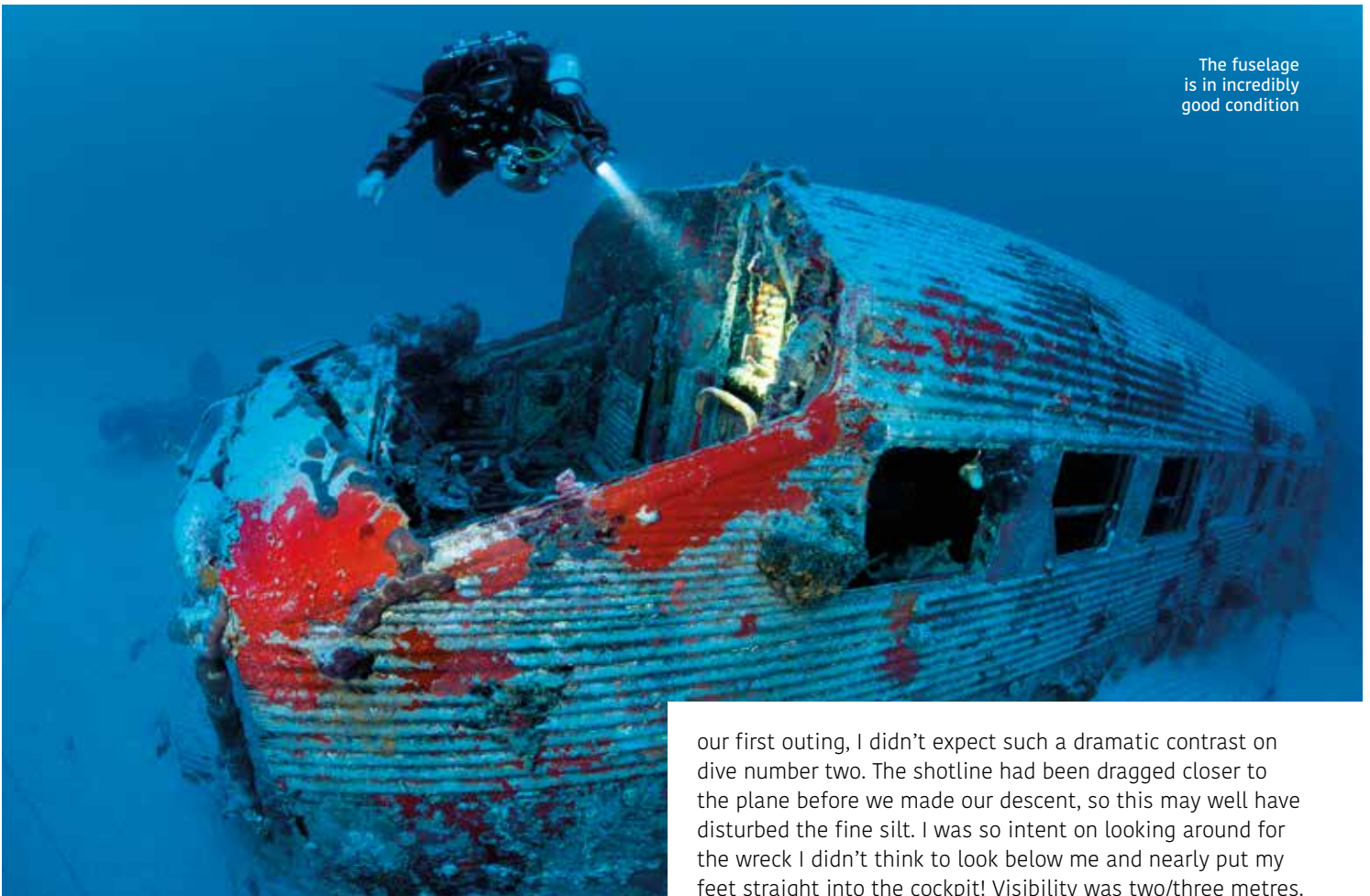
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The fuselage is in incredibly good condition



The tailfin is adorned with marine growth



dropped way below 100m close to the crash site, so if there were any other planes wrecks in the area, they would probably be much deeper. Our Ju-52 didn't have any bullet holes on the wings or on the fuselage, so it's unlikely that the plane was shot down by Allied fighters. A Facebook post from Greek historian Dimitris Galon listed more possibilities from a number of different operational units. Tying down the exact plane was not going to be easy. There was supposedly an identification plate fixed underneath the cockpit, but this area had been completely trashed in the crash.

After experiencing more than 20 metre plus visibility on

our first outing, I didn't expect such a dramatic contrast on dive number two. The shotline had been dragged closer to the plane before we made our descent, so this may well have disturbed the fine silt. I was so intent on looking around for the wreck I didn't think to look below me and nearly put my feet straight into the cockpit! Visibility was two/three metres.

This completely threw my plans for wide-angle images. I tried to get some close-up shots of the cockpit instrumentation, including throttle levers, control columns and gauges, but it was as though a thick fog had totally consumed us. The engine and propeller would have made a nice portrait front cover shot with the wing and fuselage looming in the background, but this opportunity had disappeared along with the visibility. The open hatchway we had seen on the tail section turned out to be the rear gunner position. This was completely covered with a ghost fishing net and had hidden the machine guns from us on the first dive. The Ju-52 carried two 7.62mm MG15 machine guns in the aft fuselage. There was no time for me to get photographs, but it proved the plane was military, which narrowed down our search window to the years between 1939 and 1945.

Unfortunately, my time on Rhodes had come to an end, but we had successfully found the plane, now confirmed as a German World War Two Ju-52, and it was a real privilege to take the first-ever pictures. Historical finds like this are quite rare and in hindsight, I should have extended my stay to explore the wreck more thoroughly. We didn't remove any items from the site, but I'm sure other tech divers won't be as respectful. Marinos is the only person who has the plane's exact co-ordinates, but with the Greek national media now taking an interest, who knows what will happen. ■



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