

Lost Fleet of the Rock Islands

By Tim Rock

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Palau isn't thought of as a shipwreck haven but in truth, there are more ships sunk here than in Truk Lagoon. Some WWII casualties have been salvaged and others are located in the Rock Islands, which aren't always known for their great visibility. But there's still a lot of history left and it can be seen by the adventurous and those with a thirst for history and the unusual.

Japan took control of the Micronesian islands in 1914 and ruled them until the end of World War II. They built the islands in the Palau archipelago into progressive and productive communities that specialized in mining, agriculture and fisheries. When the war came, the islands were also heavily fortified militarily. The islands of Angaur and Peleliu were the settings for fierce battles; the one on tiny Peleliu lasting for three bloody months.

Months prior to Peleliu, a two-

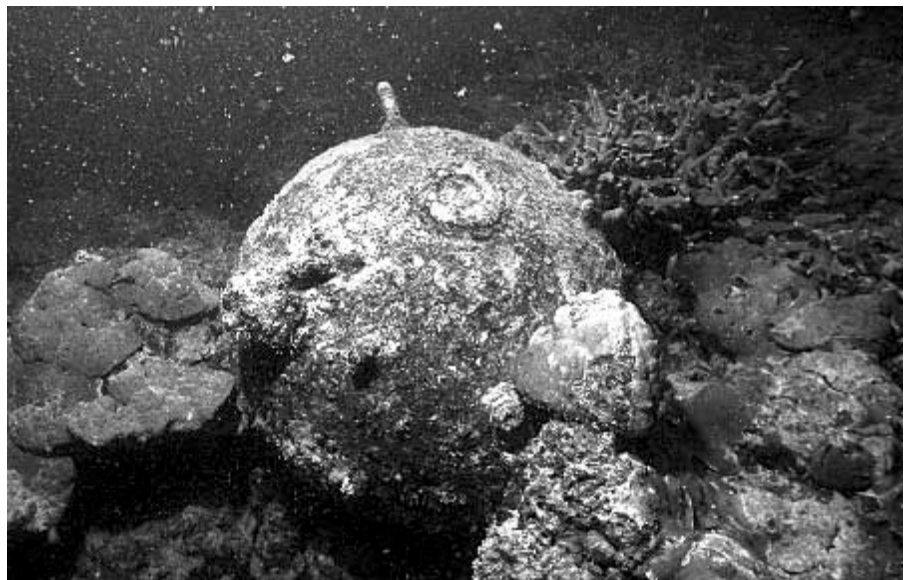


A popular snorkeling venue is this zero along the eastern coast.



Near the western passage on the way to Short Dropoff, an upside down Japanese Zero 60 feet under is a haven for copper sweepers and leaf fish.

Still armed, this harbor mine sits embedded in coral on an obscure reef near Koror.



day air strike on March 30 and 31, 1944, designated as Desecrate One, sunk a major block of the Japanese fleet. Most were freighters, but small destroyers and many planes went down in the battles. Seaplanes were sunk at their moorings or trying to escape.

Many war remnants still exist today on Babeldaup, in Koror town,

on Peleliu and in Anguar's jungles. Koror was wiped out after the U.S. forces took control of the islands. The job of rebuilding the intricate and productive Japanese infrastructure continues today, as the United States assumed a very passive role in administering the islands through the past four decades. The older people of Palau



A well-preserved float plane sits in the coral near Meyuns.

Brass lanterns are well-preserved in the Mystery Ship's bosun's locker.



still speak Japanese and sing Japanese songs when reminiscing about the peaceful days of their youth prior to the war.

For the diver weeks and even months of exploration above and below the sea are there for the taking. From the tip of Angaur where a new US WWII shipwreck was found, to the upper reaches of Velasco Reef, where a ship sunk by US President Bush Sr. lies, Palau is a treasure chest open to those who relish a glimpse at the war torn past.



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