

SS Thistlegorm

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Images by Augusto Salgado

Near midnight on October, 5 1941 SS Thistlegorm's night watch Officers were assembled on deck for a change of shift aboard the 126 meter (498 foot) "armed freighter" unaware that within hours their ship would be resting 30 meters (100 feet) below, on the bottom of the Red Sea.

Thistlegorm launched in June of 1940, she was a single screw 365 horsepower, 4898 gross ton member of the "Thistle" class of freighters owned and operated by the Albyn Line of Great Britain. Her "Armed Freighter" designation was the result of a gun deck built over the aft section and the instillation of a World War one vintage machine gun and a 4.7 inch (120 mm) breach loading anti-aircraft gun.

In May 1941, Thistlegorm was being loaded with "motor transport" supplies for Britain's Eighth Army which was fighting the German's in North Africa. The manifest designation of "motor transport" was another way of saying supplies for the war effort and was used to hide the real cargo of weapons and explosives. When Thistlegorm departed her home port of Glasgow on June, 2 1941 her holds were loaded with a wide array of armored cars, troop trucks, BSA motorcycles, aircraft and aircraft parts, land mines, weapons, ammunition, radios, artillery shells and much more. Stored on deck were six rail cars for the Egyptian railways including two locomotives.

Captain William Ellis departed Glasgow with a crew of thirty-nine and a team of nine members



Stern of Thistlegorm. Nikon D300, in a SEALUX housing, 2 Inon Z240, Tokina 10-17 at 11.5mm, f. 8, 1/40 s, ISO 400

of the Royal Navy charged with manning the ship's guns in the event of an attack. Thistlegorm made its way along the coast of England then joined a convoy of ships heading south and away from enemy forces threatening shipping in the Northern Mediterranean and Atlantic. After a long journey south Thistlegorm refueled in Capetown, South

All of the images with this article were taken this year during a week in the Red Sea on an Alex Mustard Photo Workshop.

Africa before rounding the southern tip of African and steaming north through the Gulf of Aden into the southern Red Sea.

During the third week of September 1941 Thistlegorm's large starboard anchor was dropped near the entrance to the Gulf of Suez in an assigned "safe anchorage" zone thought to be well away from the war. The ship's main engine was now shut down and the crew began to enjoy the moorage area Northeast of Shag Rock (Sha_ab Ali). Captain Ellis awaited orders to proceed north through the Gulf of Suez into the canal locks and into the Mediterranean, where his cargo would be unloaded in Alexandria. The Captains orders to move north would be based on the priority of Thistlegorm's cargo, the amount of enemy aircraft activity in the canal area and number of other vessels waiting to enter the canal. Thistlegorm was further delayed when two vessels blocked part of the canal entrance after being involved in a collision. This left the ship at anchor near Shag Rock for a full two weeks. What seemed like a welcome rest for her crew was about to become Thistlegorm's demise.

Until the sinking of the Thistlegorm no enemy ships and very few enemy aircraft had been observed venturing as far south as the "safe anchorage" near Shag Rock. Merchant ships were ordered to the anchorage area while waiting their turn to go north and through the Suez canal. What the Allied Fleet did not know was that German intelligence sources had received what they thought was creditable information regarding a large movement of British Troops headed by ship for North Africa's war front. With this newly discovered information the Germans sent two twin-engine Heinkels aircraft from a squadron stationed in Crete southeast across the Mediterranean in an



Stairs on the back of the bridge. Nikon D300, in a SEALUX housing, 2 Inon Z240, Tokina 10-17 at 11.5 mm, f. 11, 1/125 s, ISO 200

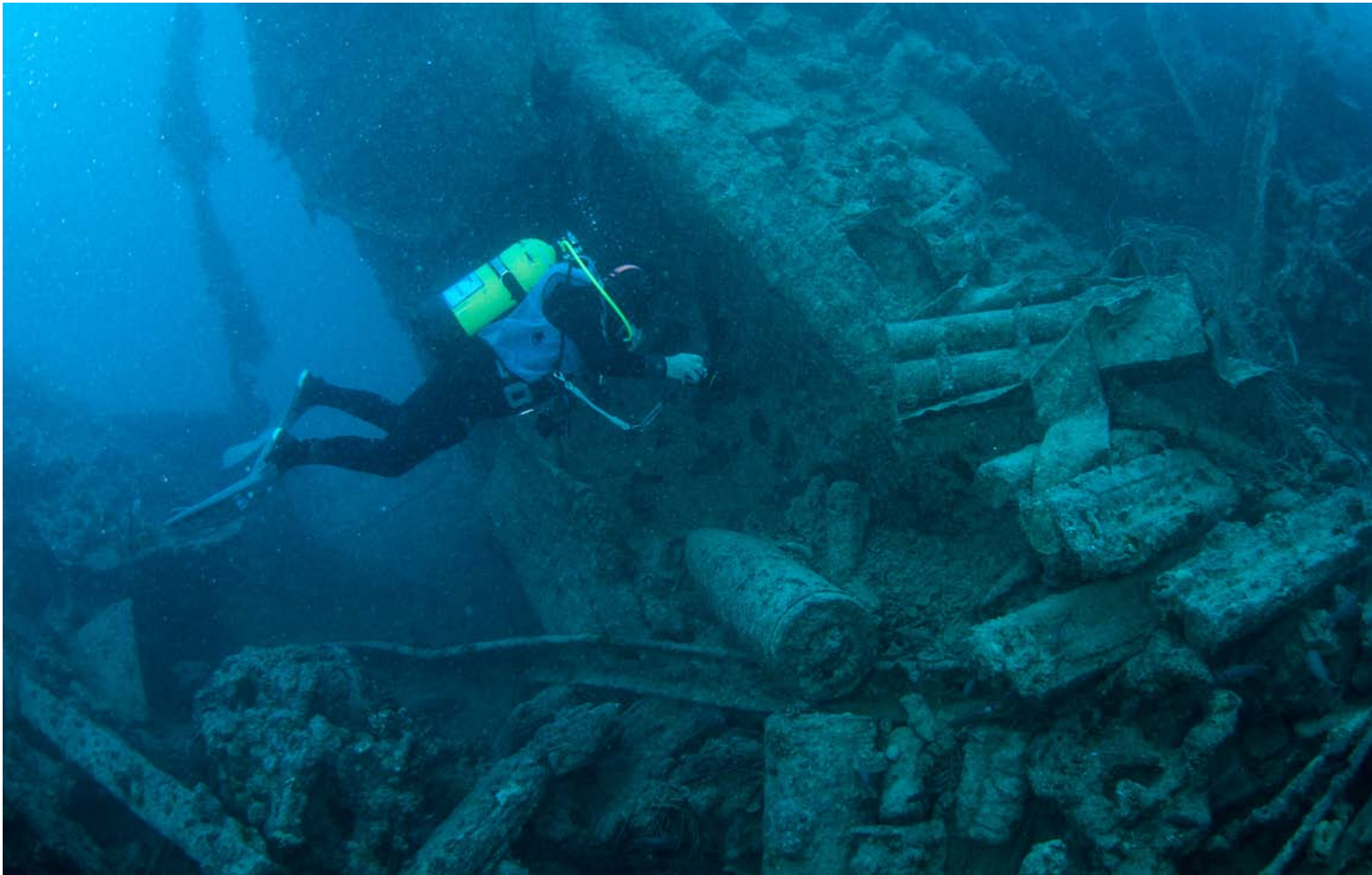
attempt to locate and destroy any large vessels moving up the Gulf of Suez.

The German pilots were newly trained to fly the Heinkels at night and were airborne during the late evening hours of October, 5 1941. The



Truck with boots. Nikon D300, in a SEALUX housing, 2 Inon Z240, Tokina 10-17 at 10mm, f. 8, 1/30 s, ISO 400

night sky was clear with visibility enhanced by the moonlight reflecting off the sea below. After logging several hours of flight time without spotting any vessels the pilots began the turn north for the flight back to Crete on their dwindling fuel supply. Soon



Ordnance middle hold. Nikon D300, in a SEALUX housing, 2 Inon Z240, Tokina 10-17 at 10mm, f. 9, 1/100 s, ISO 200

one of the pilots spotted a large ship at anchor on the moonlit sea. He reduced altitude and turned the aircraft so that his bombing run could be made low and over the bow of Thistlegorm. Once the pilot reached the bridge he released two bombs that both penetrated the number five hold aft of the bridge structure and detonated

along with much of Thistlegorm's cargo of munitions which were stored in that hold. The violent explosion tore up through the main deck forcing it back towards the bridge and launching both railway locomotives into the sea leaving the deck looking like it had been opened by a gigantic can opener.

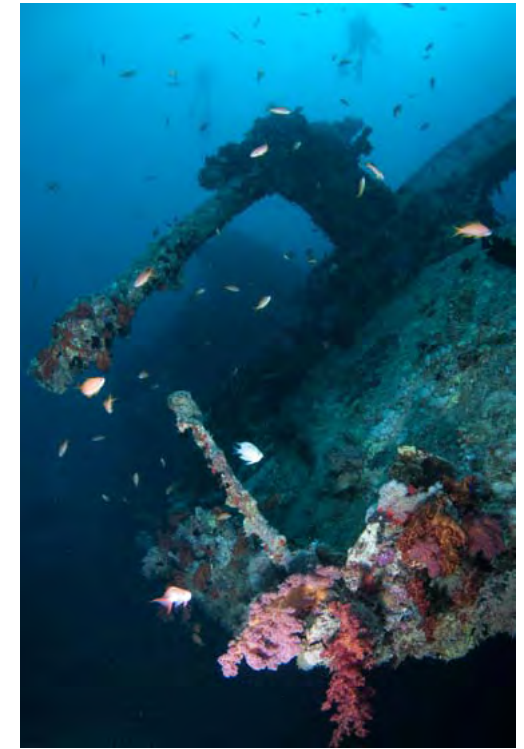
Thistlegorm's night watch was caught unaware of the impending attack and was unable to defend their ship or raise her giant anchor in an attempt to run. As Thistlegorm quickly sank her crew had little time to abandon ship leaving many scrambling to jump into the warm night sea without time to launch the

lifeboats that lined her rails. Captain Ellis and the other surviving crew members were later plucked from the sea near the wreck site by the HMS Carlisle's crew and transported to Suez.

Ellis lost four of his thirty-nine member crew and five of the nine Royal Navy crew during the sinking. Captain Ellis and several crew members were later given War Service Awards by King George VI for their courage under fire during the attack on Thistlegorm.

The Thistlegorm lay undisturbed for over a decade until her discovery by a Jacques Cousteau expedition aboard Calypso in the early fifties. During the exploration of Thistlegorm the ship's bell and Captain's safe were raised by Cousteau's team. Cousteau never revealed her location, so she was again lost to the sea. In the early nineties, Thistlegorm was rediscovered by a group of divers who happened upon her location by accident.

Since her rediscovery, Thistlegorm has established herself as a world class wreck dive and is



Stern gun. Nikon D300, in a SEALUX housing, 2 Inon Z240, Tokina 10-17 at 10mm, f. 10, 1/160 s, ISO 200

Motorbike. Nikon D300, on SEALUX housing, 2 Inon Z240, Tokina 10-17 at 10mm, f. 10, 1/30 s, ISO 400

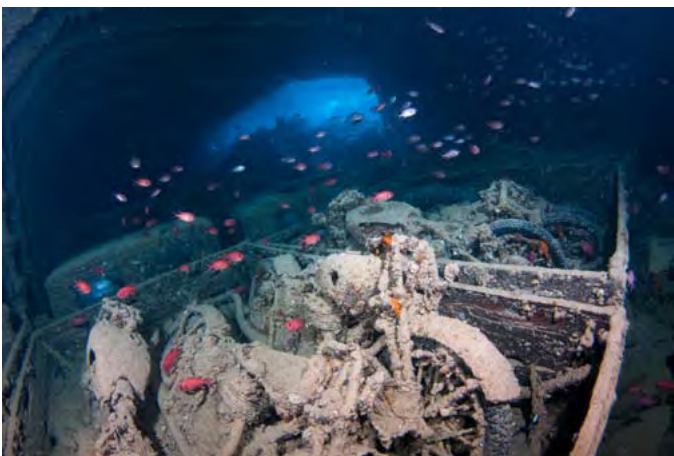
perhaps the most frequently dived wreck in the world. At around 30 meters to the sand she sits upright and is fairly well intact from the bridge forward. The highest part of the ship sits in about 10 meters of water. Resting on a sandy bottom in an area of relatively calm seas, warm waters and good visibility the wreck

has attracted thousands of divers of varying skill levels from around the world. The wreck site is between the resort area of Hurghada in Egypt and the resort town of Sharm El Sheikh in the southern Sinai (also part of Egypt) with Hurghada being the much longer day boat ride. The wreck is a frequent destination for dive operators

from the resorts towns and for live-aboard operators from Sharm and the mainland.

Much like Truk Lagoon's famous wrecks in the South Pacific, the Thistlegorm is an underwater treasure-trove of WWII memorabilia. Laying upright about 30 meters from the wreck's starboard side is one of the

railway locomotives blown from the deck during the bombing. Still intact in the ships holds are truck, trailers, motorcycles, tires, rubber boots, weapons, ammunition and much much more. The machine gun and 4.7 inch (120 mm) anti-aircraft gun remain mounted on the rear deck of the ship never having been fired during the



attack.

In addition to Thistlegorm's many WW II treasures is an abundance of marine life which will delight even the most jaded diver. During my dives to the wreck, I encountered large schools of Bat fish around the mooring lines which provided an opportunity for great photos during my safety stops. In the sand around the wreck, I found a diverse collection of unusual critters that would keep any macro photographer happy for hours. On the hull I found a large variety of hard and soft corals, anemones with large congregations of resident anemonefish, lionfish, humphead wrasse, yellowbar angelfish and many more creatures in staggering numbers. For sports divers, wreck divers, photo/

video enthusiasts, wildlife zealots and WW II wreck fanatics you will find the opportunities at this wreck site highly rewarding. You will surely want to dive the Thistlegorm more than once during any stay in Egypt.

If you are making your first trip to Egypt be sure to visit some of the astounding land diversions which can be found in this historic country. As always, I recommend that you seek out the proper training and equipment for this type of diving before your trip begins. Penetrations into the wreck should NEVER be made without proper training, equipment and a competent dive operator.

Phil Rudin

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