

בס"ד



Japanese 'hellship'

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Wreck of World War II Japanese 'hellship' that sank with more than 1,000 Allied POWs on board discovered off the Philippines

The remains of a Japanese "hellship" that was torpedoed in 1944 and sank with more than 1,000 POWs on board have been found off the coast of the Philippines island of Luzon.

BY TOM METCALFE

The wreck of a Japanese prison ship that was sunk by U.S. warplanes and went down with more than 1,000 Allied prisoners of war in 1944 has been discovered in the Philippines.

The vessel was one of the notorious "hellships" used by the Japanese to ferry POWs between work camps. Many of the prisoners who died when the ship sank had worked on the infamous Burma-Thailand "Death Railway."

"Sadly, a lot of these prisoner transport ships were sunk by the Allies," expedition leader and American TV show host Josh Gates told Live

Science. "The ships were painted to just look like military vessels, and they were inside the Japanese convoys — so the Allies thought they were legitimate military targets."

Gates teamed up with the Hellships Memorial Foundation, a U.S.-registered non-profit based in Subic Bay in the Philippines, to investigate the sinking of the hellship Hōfuku Maru. Its wreck had never been found, probably because searchers were guided by incorrect U.S. records to look too far north, he said.

But Japanese wartime records were more precise about the wreck's location, helping the team find the remains of the Hōfuku Maru in January, Gates said. His team has since made five dives to the wreck, which sits a few miles off the west coast of the main Philippines island of Luzon at a depth of about 160 feet (50 meters).

Prison ships

Japan used more than 130 hellships during World War II, but the wrecks of only a few have been found. Many hellships, including the Hōfuku Maru, were converted freighters. The Hōfuku Maru was used as a prison ship from 1942 until its sinking about two years later.

Gates said the vessel was part of a Japanese military convoy sailing from the Philippines to Japan when it was attacked on Sept. 21, 1944. U.S. warplanes had spotted the convoy, and one dropped a torpedo that cut the Hōfuku Maru in half. It quickly sank.

But the ship had roughly 1,200 Allied POWs on board, from the British and Dutch armies, many of whom had been forced to work on the Death Railway. Some were able to swim ashore, but they were recaptured by the Japanese. About 1,040 died in the sinking, Gates said.

War captives

The 1929 Geneva Convention placed strict limits on the use of prisoners of war for labor, but Japan was infamous for flouting these rules during World War II, claiming that it never ratified the convention and that wartime made POW labor important. Japan used POWs for slave labor on railways and docks, as well as in factories and mines. Of the roughly 132,100 prisoners captured from the United States and United Kingdom armies, nearly a third of them — about 35,000 people — died of exhaustion, malnutrition and disease.

Gates said the Japanese hellships used to ferry thousands of POWs between work camps were miserable places themselves: there was little light, air, or food, and prisoners might be kept there for months. Human remains have been identified on the newfound wreck, and it will now be considered a war grave, he said. International conventions aim to prevent such wrecks from being disturbed.

The team first spotted the wreck with sonar, and then dove to identify parts of the structure that confirmed it as the Hōfuku Maru. They also mapped the wreck with a remotely operated underwater vehicle, which helped them determine that the ship had split into separate parts, just as accounts of the sinking had reported.

The Hellships Memorial Foundation would now work to try to locate the families of the victims, Gates said.