

SUB VISION OFF KOH TAO



A US submarine sunk in deep water off Thailand offers an unforgettable spectacle for technical divers, says
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WORKING THROUGH THE WINTER of 1943/44, it must have been a cold and unforgiving time on the banks of Lake Michigan. The wartime employees of the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company could hardly have known that the story they began in those cold winter months, constructing US submarines, would conclude in the warm tropics, on the small Thai island of Koh Tao.

So hang up your drysuits, find a shortie and follow the crew of the ill-fated USS *Lagarto* to her resting place in the deep, clear waters of the South China Sea.

Lagarto was the 21st of 28 fleet-class submarines built by Manitowoc during World War Two, and the 11th of its

Balao-class boats. Weighing in at 1526 tons, she was 312ft long and carried two 5in deck guns and 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns.

Charles West, President of Manitowoc and a pioneer in his time, pressed for government military contracts and won them, despite having no direct seaward access. So the *Lagarto* had to make an amazing journey before even tasting salt water, travelling south on Lake Michigan to Chicago, down the Illinois River and onto an innovative floating dry dock in Mississippi, on to New Orleans then through the Panama Canal, to arrive in Pearl Harbour on the last Christmas Day of WW2.

She received her orders and left the US base, only to vanish without trace



seven months after being commissioned, and weeks before the suspension of war.

Not long ago, deepwater explorers Jamie Macleod and Stewart Oehl took up the challenge to trace the *Lagarto*. Their journey led them through archives and military records, and had them poring over communication reports and

Top: Intact instruments on the bridge of the *Lagarto*. Above: Diving from the *Trident*.