

**Mr. TOMIMATSU ISHIKAWA**  
who was aboard as chief engineer  
Of Japanese Imperial Navy oil tanker "IRO"

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On Mar 30 2004, Mr. Tomimatsu Ishikawa (86 years old) who lives in the Mie prefecture near Osaka, Japan, dove IRO which is sunken vessel during WWII. He went down to 28m(90ft) and prayed to his fallen comrades. IRO was a fleet oiler, supply ship and one of the biggest shipwreck in Palau. It is 143.25m(430 feet) length, 17.68m (58 feet) beam and 14,050 tons. Mr. Ishikawa was on board for 4 years and 10 months until IRO was sunk during he was 21-26 years old. He knows everything about IRO it's like his house. And he was only one survivor engineer when they got attack.

On the IRO, there were 150 sailor and 87engineer soldiers (30 of them were trainer). It's truly Japanese navy ship because of including many soldiers. The term MARU, usually added as a suffix to the name of a Japanese ship, is not added to the name of this ship. This is due to the military origin of the Iro. The term Maru is used to identify civilian ships. The Japanese converted many of their civilian ships for military use during WWII. For example, YAMATO, MUSASHI, HYUGA are belong to military because they don't use "MARU". And these names of battleships have meaning. It was named from old Japanese local district. On the other hand, IRO, SATA, AKASHI, OSE, they were special task ships, and named from Japanese cape. During WWII, IRO had been to Ravaul, Borneo, Saipan, Philippine.... On March 22, 1944, on her way from Philippines to Palau, a torpedo launched from the submarine USS Tunny hit her bow forward of the bulkheads. You can see this big damage at bow if you dove IRO. Just before they got U.S. airforce attack in Palau, IRO stayed next to AKASHI (special repair ship) for repairing this damage.

On Mar30-31 1944, U.S. warplanes attacked the Japanese military supply base in Palau. This operation is called DESCECRATE ONE. Most of Japanese ship staying Palau was bombed and had sunk at that time. Mr. Ishikawa said, 2 days before of their attack, U.S. scattered paper latter from sky that suggested they'll attack Japanese ships on Mar 30. So they knew when they got attack. At that time, IRO stayed with AKASHI, but both of them are big ships and easy to find so IRO escaped to another place for hiding. On Mar 30 1944, sky was perfect clear and attack was started from morning and he could see all of U.S. airplane that was coming from aircraft carrier. When IRO got massive explosion on the back of vessel, Mr. Ishikawa was working in engine room which was close to explosion. Big bomb made him black out but after 30 minutes, he woke up. Engine room was full of black smoke and couldn't see that who was still survive. Even he couldn't see anything but this place is like his house so he could find ladder feeling his way and go out. He unloaded two life raft and went down from back of vessel to surface following rope ladder. He drifted for 6 or 7 hours with 5 survived sailors. IRO was staying inside of lagoon with many small islands. But emergency life raft was very hard to control even he tried to close to island. Also rock

island was vertical so he couldn't climb up. U.S. airforce attack was still lasting and when they found people on surface, they tried to shoot obstinately from the angle of 45 degrees. When airplane came to close to him with fearful noise, he jumped from raft to ocean and hiding underwater until airplane passed to him. If he dived 20cm (0.7 feet), bullet was flicked on surface and gone. Once airplane passed him over, they have to fly back again for attacking him. It was getting darker and darker, and at last, Mr. Ishikawa could reach one of the small island which was furthest around the area That was not vertical rock so he could climb up. And there were cave also.

U.S. attack was still lasting until evening of next day (Mar31).

Around 10:00 p.m. on Mar 31, Japanese rescue ship (That was fishing vessel for bonito from Yaizu, Shizuoka prefecture) from Koror found him and he managed to back to town.

Foreign reporter asked to Mr. Ishikawa "Why don't you run away from IRO even you know you are going to get attack and die?" He answered " Japanese education of military never allow to give up so nobody run away. Only the case we get command to go away, we'll follow it." And he lasted "I knew later actually we had command to everybody going away from fleet at that moment. But first explosion to IRO made big fire close to our engine room. Command came from front bridge but never reached to our area at back. Our way to communication was using simple long pipe to talk or telephone in the ship only and first attack broke all of it. I guess if they didn't have command to go away, everyone had going to commit suicide."

After he got rescue and backed to Koror town, he never met anybody who worked with him. At that time he was 26 years old and had about 50 young engineer under him. And he never be sure even they alive or not. IRO was sunk so he stayed lodging (That was school, located at top of hill in Koror) and got job for coast patrol. When he was not busy, he always tried to check IRO area. Almost everyday he was watching IRO.

After got attack, IRO was floating and engine room has been fired for 10 days. They had 300 big drum cans for airplane gasoline so fire was serious. Little by little IRO started to sink underwater. At the beginning, stern started to sink and later he could see only bow floating on surface. After 1 month, whole of vessel was sunk silently under 40m (120 feet) depth. Some of wreck expert in U.S. mentioned on his book, "After attack, IRO was sunk soon but SATA (sister ship of IRO) was floating with fire for a while." But Mr. Ishikawa said it is wrong. "I was watching IRO every 2 days so I know it exactly. And IRO had a lot of gasoline at the time but SATA didn't. So I know SATA never got big fire."

In Palau, we have another shipwreck called "SATA". This ship is perfectly same style with IRO and only name is different so we call it sister ship. SATA also sank underwater and it is 220m (660 feet) farther than IRO. SATA did not go down easily and was bombed repeatedly by the U.S Navy till she suddenly sank and turned over on her way to the bottom. Neither ship carried a name or any other identifying serial numbers nor to this day has anything been found to positively identify which ship is the SATA and

which is the IRO. Ever since their discovery, numerous efforts have been made to identify which ship is which. Underwater it is easy to tell one ship from the other, one sits upright and the other has capsized. For the sake of continuity, we will follow Dan Bailey's identification and will refer to this wreck as the IRO (Klaus Lindemann, another wreck expert, identified her as the Sata). But Mr. Ishikawa said "Identification is easy because IRO has big bomb damage under her bow."

We can't find any Japanese book treating about WWII in Palau. I don't know it's because of we were defeated war or we don't like to treat again these sad war. Most of book treating about Japanese wreck ship are written by foreigner. But inside of it is all about Japanese wreck. In Palau, 80% of dive shop is Japanese shop. But no one likes to dive wreck. Even most of Japanese never talk about wreck. Generally most of Japanese diver don't like wreck diving. The reason is not only one. For example, Japanese diver really like fish watching but on the wreck we don't have more big fishes than outer reef. It's inside of lagoon so visibility is poor. I was working in Japanese dive shop for 2 years but I didn't know we have wreck in Palau for these 2 years even I was diving guide. Some foreign diver requested me wreck dive, but I answered "We don't have wreck" even it was Japanese wreck. After 2 years, I changed job to international dive shop, I started to know we have more than 20 wreck diving point which many foreigner discovered spending for long time. But I was also same as most of Japanese diver, I didn't prefer wreck diving. Not one reason that I mentioned before. According to dive wreck several times, I started to feel it's also reason because we are loser of war. Many ancestor dead just here. If we are winner of war and this wreck is our place for win, I guess our feeling to wreck dive will be big different. Diving is fun. But we have pity on dive Japanese wreck for our fun. It's like we are playing at graveyard. Our ancestor fought for us and defeated outright. It was happened only 60 years ago (some of our family is still healthy) After wreck diving, we couldn't say "It was fun !" or "It was nice !!" We only feel miserable and complicated feelings.

Because of those reasons, most of Japanese never dive wrecks also never talk about it.

IRO is Japanese name but we used alphabet for mention it. We didn't know how to spell IRO in Japanese kanji. Even Japanese guide called it wrong name "IRO MARU" (actually IRO never has -MARU) In European dive shop, I started to translate wreck document in English to Japanese for my job. I couldn't find any Japanese reference book about wrecks in Palau.

It was really lucky I could meet Mr. Ishikawa this time. He talked a lot of truth about we never know before. I found many history of Japan in Palau and surprised it very much. Especially, I impressed about feeling of soldier within war talked by himself which nobody mention on book. I really appreciate that I could know history of Palau, what Japanese did in Palau. I never know it before and could gain more knowledge. We have to know our history before we talk we like it or not.

Mr. Ishikawa always talked quietly and gently about my question. Never excited, never cried. Just talk truth silently with tender smile. I felt I was spending time with my grandfather.

He said "We have luck... Lucky people always survive ." Few month before they come to Palau, IRO got torpedo attack. It was close to his room but only at the moment he was out and survived. When IRO got a bomb exploded in Palau, only him regained consciousness and survived. I talked him how lucky he was but his answer was big different to my feeling. In Palau, he liked to die as soon as possible. Their job was to give their life for their country. They never guess they could back to Japan again. If he survive in Palau longer, it means they spend longer time in hell. It's better was killed at work earlier.

After IRO sank, he stayed Koror for 1 and half year. If he had a chance to apply suicide squad, he was always first person to apply it. And his comrades also applied following him. It was the time close to the end of WWII, he applied to join human torpedo. This means people become human bomb. 3 soldier operate and clash with himself, for underwater attack. They were planning to attack U.S. airforce mother ship staying near Peleliu island. Mr. Ishikawa said, "Now we know it was no meaning for big ship, even such a small torpedo attack them. It is useless death. But at that time nobody considered it was useless. Our duty was only one, being defeated outright for Peleliu."

It should be last dinner for him. Tomorrow morning he is leaving Koror to Peleliu with his torpedo. On the torpedo ship, cook served beef steak that was special dinner for only going soldier. When he started dinner, they got awful shock on their ship. U.S. attacked their torpedo ship and ship was fired. Mr. Ishikawa got out like mad from capsized ship and tried to climb up one of the island. Later, he found his feet had a lot of injury because he stepped limestone but he never felt pain till that time. Torpedo ship was exploded and his operation for tomorrow was given up. The other torpedo ship with his comrades didn't get attack at the night and went to Peleliu next morning and never come back.

Omekang Island (two dog island) is famous because of beautiful beach and nature. Most of diver & tourist visit here for their lunchtime. During WWII, Japanese called these islands area "triplets island" because it looks like 3 kids lying down on surface. It was the middle point from Koror to Peleliu. Even Japanese local guide doesn't know we have Japanese fortress of war behind this paradise. One of Germany diving guide showed me this fortress. If we walked from beach to Jungle bush just 5 minutes, the back of beach was all Japanese fortress. The small shelter that only 1-2 person can lie down was lined from the ground to top of cliff. We could find a lot of hand grenade, bullet, mess kit, many kinds of parts on the ground. I visited there with Mr. Ishikawa. In the jungle, we found handmade rocky partition in front of shelter. He explained to me " Sometime we have nothing to do in such a small island. Maybe they had time in here and made this partition for protecting shelter in case if they got attack."

He found falling coconuts on ground and started to talk, "If we found 1 coconuts, we could survive 2 more days. We could feel full if we drank juice and ate white skin inside of coconut. And if we made fire with these coconut husks, there was no smoke. So even we cook something with this fire, no enemy find us." Also he talked "We ate these red hibiscus. We boiled these flowers and put some salt and ate. And at the end of war we didn't have any food and really hungry. We ate anything... snake, lizard, mouse, snail, core of coconut tree, wild flower and stem of sweat potato..... I was really skinny."

During wreck diving, I found old beer bottle sometimes. If we rubbed off the mud of bottle, we could read some Japanese word, "KIRIN BEER" or "DAINIPPON BREWERY"....

I asked to Mr. Ishikawa "Did some upper classes drink beer?" And he answered "Every classes people on ship could buy it. We had a small stand called "Shuho" for selling beer or sweets. It was opened from 6:00pm for everybody with announce "Shuho was opened !!" I asked him how to pay and he explained "Even military, they gave us small salary each month. It was very small like a pocket money for kids. We had bankbook each person and every month they put salary on it. If we bought some beer, they reduced from bankbook. Big drinker was always no balance on his bankbook. But when we got attack on IRO, all bankbook was fired and even small money which we saved was all gone." I can't guess how was life in war. For me it looks like in an extreme situation even we don't know we have tomorrow or not. But actually they had their daily life like us. Mr. Ishikawa talked "In Navy we had a lot of seamen with nice heart. Even upper classes they were generous to lower classes and we had nice time. In Navy, "Shuho" was opened all day on Sunday." I asked him "A lot of soldier worked together. And they had many characters. Did all soldiers work very hard and do their best? Was some of soldier lazy or defiant?" He answered "I never see such a people. Everybody fought in a body like mad. Our policy was 'for our country' only."

What did he do in Palau after war was over? He said "U.S. navy brought us back to Yokosuka (Kanagawa, Japan) by ship. They served meal and treated us not like an enemy." I talked him "How lucky you were that you could back to Japan and meet your family even you faced to a lot of critical moment of death." But his answer was "At the time I never feel happy about it. I liked to die because it was embarrassed to back without die for Japan. Even I could back to Japan, I couldn't expect how poor Japan now."

War was dreadful. He felt unhappy even he could back to Japan and meet his family, "After I was demobilized, I couldn't do anything long time because I felt shock about atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki or I heard story about an air-raid"

Mr. Ishikawa, he was born in Kuwana-city, Mie prefecture, and his father had a business of the shipping trade. They had their own freighter. After war, he kept going to do his shipping business until 65 years old. And his son didn't follow his job. When he was 67years old, by chance he saw NHK TV that treated underwater of IRO. He contacted to NHK and found Mr. Koichi Tsubomoto who was shot IRO at that time. He was from Osaka and underwater wreck photographer. Especially he has taking picture of underwater shipwreck in Micronesia for long time. Mr. Ishikawa visited Palau when he was 77 years old. Mr. Tsubomoto helped his introductory diving in IRO. At that time Mr. Ishikawa managed to do 4 times wreck diving including IRO and did memorial service by himself. Many of news media came to report about this event. He did this event by his own money because he begged many Japanese know about 'soldiers who dead for Japan'. In Japan we don't have a lot of books which treated about WWII Japanese shipwreck. Most of Japanese never reminisce about war and careless of it.

At this time he discussed about his ideology a lot but nobody (Mainichi-news, Yomiuri-news...) treated about his real intention that he likes to inform. He didn't know it was because of reporter didn't like his

opinion or due to policy of newspaper publisher. Asahi-news that is bigger newspaper publisher, even never came to interview about this matter. His mortification was getting bigger.

Afterward he tried to ask Ministry of Health and Welfare to show him membership list that was treated who was on board in IRO with him on December 1943. Because he would like to find other survivor of IRO at present. But they never show him. He was mortified why they never show it....

March 30 2004, it was 60th anniversary of the American bombing of IRO on Mar 30 1944. Mr. Ishikawa decided to go to Palau. He determined to dive in IRO even it was reckless. He thought it's better than just only through flower from boat. His determination is not sentimental feeling like to see IRO. Mr. Ishikawa talked "Do you know the reason why such an old man around 86 years old should dive WWII shipwreck now? Because I'm sad now nobody care the remains died for war. I'd like to appeal to everybody by myself, even it's reckless, I like to dive IRO and remind people what happened here before."

I didn't know Mr. Ishikawa before. He was calm and tender gentleman. Also he was smart and strong, I couldn't believe he was 86 years old !! He always kept smiling and cheerfully without showing strong passion inside of him. Never bother anybody and always gentle. Many people from outer countries interviewed him, "What's your feeling to dive IRO?" "What do you feel to come back to Palau again?" "How do you think many divers dive your ship, IRO?" But he didn't talk a lot. He looked quiet, but actually he has full of passion to manage to do memorial service for his comrades.

Fish 'n Fins organized special wreck diving week "3<sup>rd</sup> Wrexpedition to Palau" from March 28-April 1, 2004. We made this event every year. We dove 3 wrecks per day and visited 15 wrecks in Palau for those 5 days. Every night we made wreck seminar or slide show in our shop with people from all over the world.

Our owner, Navot Bornovski made this event under the aim.

a. This event is about peace not war; we have young and old people from all over the world that came to pay respect to ALL the people who died in WWII.

b. This event is not about pointing fingers or blaming anyone, the fact is that every one lost in WWII because so many people died on all sides. But on the other hand everyone won because 60 years later we are here as friends with mutual hobby!!

Mr. Ishikawa visited Fish 'n Fins on these days with Mr. Tsubomoto (wreck photographer). Mr. Ishikawa is not diver so he can't dive with certified divers. His menu should be introductory diving with instructor. I guess this is rare case even all over the world that 86 years old man did intro diving to 90ft depth.

1<sup>st</sup> day, he tried snorkeling and watched people dove in Bicchu-maru from surface.

Next day he visited IRO and did dive. He followed all my advice and remembered the problem of last time when he tried to intro dive 9 years ago. He tried to dive carefully and not make same mistake at last time. He told me "Last time I moved my fins vainly and was out of breath." And when he down with descend line to bottom, he tried to keep his fin stopping. This is very hard technique for beginner. Also when he tried to hold regulator with his mouth, it was heavy and came out with his dentures. He asked me to fix support elastic band to regulator like for hat. When I fixed it besides him, he advised me, "Will you give it to me? If you try on this way, it'll be stronger." and helped me... he was professional engineer. Tomorrow is Mar 30. We are planning to make underwater memorial service in IRO. Many divers and reporters will come to see him. He is planning to take handmade metal table to deck in IRO. This table was fixed by his son for setting flowers and Japanese "sake" which was chosen by Mr. Ishikawa for his comrades. We downed to 90ft and dove for around 30 minutes. We were absorbed in diving hand in hand. And communicated together in writing on underwater slate "Let's put table here"... He did his great job. After dive, he said with smile, "Maybe I can succeed tomorrow if we try slowly."

3<sup>rd</sup> day, March 30 was clear sky. We went to IRO with about 15 divers from many countries. Some of TV companies and newspaper reporters joined too. President of Palau also planning to dive with Mr. Ishikawa and made public, but he couldn't arrange his busy schedule and canceled this day. Some of American divers who dove with another dive shop heard this news. They got close to our boat and encouraged to Mr. Ishikawa with big smile.

We started dive around 10:00am that was exactly the time when IRO got attack 60 years ago. To begin with, our dive staff (including me) went down to 90 ft. We put ceremony table on the deck that is upper part of his engine room. And set flowers and bottle of Japanese sake on the table. It was first trial for us but everything was very smooth. I felt God saved us. We tied descend line for Mr. Ishikawa from boat to bottom and backed to boat.

Mr. Ishikawa started to dive with me calmly. There were a lot of audience divers around him. TV camera chased him with tremendous lighting to his face. I guess how hard to dive for him because he is not certified diver. Also lots of stress because of his desire and expectation of audience. But he dove alone following my advice perfectly. It was introductory diving so I was holding his hand, but when we were close to engine room, his grip became stronger and stronger. I felt his tension from his hand.

It was smooth and we spent 2 minutes to reach bottom of deck. It was 90 feet and bottom was silted. If divers moved busy, soon we lost visibility because of muddy. For beginner, usually it is hard to keep his balance without moving. It's like kids try to ride bicycle first time. But Mr. Ishikawa exerted himself not to move his fins following my advice. On the other hand certified divers around him made there muddy.

Mr. Ishikawa sat down falling to his knees, took away his prayer beads which was tied on his BC jacket and started to pray with it. I thought he was all right but if I was keeping touch to him I guessed he felt be relieved. So I stayed beside him arm in arm. After 2-3 minutes, he gave me sign for ascent and we left there. He talked me later, at that time he felt to cramp his feet because of standing firm without moving long time. He was always saying if we felt something anxious, let's stop diving not sticking to do it. We

started to leave from 90ft, came up slowly. The depth was 30ft at the top of mast. We stayed there for a while, watched tropical fish and colorful coral and said goodbye to IRO. Mr. Ishikawa talked to me, "I think not only me but also my comrades staying IRO are happy about we could succeed in this ceremony because of many people cooperated us this time. Thank you Yoko." I felt somebody protected us underwater. It was surprised for me everything was smooth and perfect.

Our foreign diving staff also came up bringing back table and bottle of sake from underwater. Tender palauan diving staff said, "I tied bunch of flowers to IRO deck." After few week he dove IRO again and came to me with smile, "Yoko, I saw flower was still there !!"

Fish 'n Fins sent all of our staff for this diving and tried to do our best. We hope Mr. Ishikawa can accomplish to dive in IRO safety. Tova, our owner from Israel, managed to be free his diving fee "We don't charge it, we present these dive to him."

After ceremony Mr. Ishikawa was planning to share bottle of Sake which we took to underwater for everybody. Before we leave IRO, he also sprinkled the part of Sake from boat to his comrades. He talked toward ocean "Guys, Please sleep in peace." I saw there were tears in his eyes. The reason why he tried to dive in IRO even such a old age was he has pity on still a lot of comrades was left in underwater and nobody care it. He wishes Japanese government tried to salvage them as much as possible.

During Wrexpedition we had seminar every night. At the evening we watch the film "the brave soldier who loved Japan" with simultaneous interpretation. And Mr. Ishikawa served Japanese Sake that we brought back from IRO ceremony to audience from all over the world.

Next day, we already dove together 3 days and knew well each other. So I asked Mr. Ishikawa easily, "Will you try to dive tropical area?" But he answered gently, "Oh, it's enough. I'll watch from boat not sticking to it." Finally I understand, for him this trip was neither for vacation nor for watching underwater. He just dove by himself at the risk of his life. On the day we went out to Rock Island for just sight seeing by boat. But I was happy about when he stayed on boat with his son who fixed ceremony table, his son talked to him, "Dad, don't you think we can really relax if we stay ocean? I feel we like ocean very much."

Mr. Ishikawa talked "Maybe from now on, no other elder people come to visit IRO for memorial service." For a long time he is waiting some survivor of IRO contact to him because of watching his news about IRO. But until now nobody has been contacted to him yet. He guesses anyone worked in IRO were gone. "Now in Japan, people are discussing about dispatch of Self Defense-Forces to Iraq. But we should not forget to discuss also about hundreds thousand of soldiers who died for Japan was still left alone. Japan should care our WWII remains whose still staying in wrecks. For example if we made memorial monument at defeated outright place, we could know what happened in there and never forget this matter forever. I don't care people dive in wreck for fun but I hope nobody take or move something from wreck. I wish we could show this wreck to later ages." This is his wish.