

Diving the Wreck of the Missile Ship – Satil

It was the summer of 1967. Five brand new missile ships built in French shipbuilding facilities, floated silently in the harbor of Cherbourg, France. They had been bought and paid for by the Israeli Navy, but because of a French arms embargo, could not be delivered to their new owners.

Under cover of darkness, groups of Israelis disguised as innocuous-looking dock workers, quietly boarded the empty ships. When the sun rose over Cherbourg, Frenchmen were surprised to find the ships gone, steaming east over the Mediterranean, on their way to Israel.

Until the mid-1990's, the Satil and her four sister ships were used to defend Israel's coast. They became obsolete when newer, more powerful, hi-tech missile ships replaced them.

Thirty years later, in 1997, an elite force of Israeli SEALs was dispatched on a secret rescue mission in Lebanon. Details of the operation are still highly classified, but things went badly awry, and twelve Israeli commandos were killed.

As a memorial to their fallen comrades, the navy decided to purposely sink the Satil off the coast of Nahariya, in Northern Israel, and create a permanent, artificial reef in their honor.

The three of us – Itamar, who is a well-known underwater photographer, Orlian, who is a certified SCUBA instructor and model, and I - signed in and collected our gear at the clean and efficient Nahariya Dive Center. It was a quick and smooth ride in their 21-foot fiberglass boat to the wreck.

Along with us were a tourist from Denmark, an exchange student from California, and three Israelis. One of the Israeli divers, David, had actually served on the sunken ship, and described it to us in detail. It had four engines, traveled at 30 knots, was 105 feet long, weighed 57 tons, had a crew of 35 sailors, and had been fitted with missile launchers and more conventional gun emplacements. The wreck was sitting upright at 80 feet, with its highest point at 51 feet. It was perfectly intact, although all armaments had been removed and all hatches sealed shut, to avoid any danger to divers.

Israeli soldiers have a macho reputation, but David's voice cracked as he spoke emotionally about how proud he was to see his old ship serve as a fitting memorial to his comrades.

The other two Israelis refused to tell me why, but hinted at a surprise waiting for me on the ship's deck below. The surprise had to do with the unusual way in which the 12 dead soldiers were memorialized.

We descended the anchor line, and at 15 feet the entire ship was perfectly visible, as a barnacle-encrusted gray ghost on the sandy, grassy seabed. We swam to the middle of the starboard side and proceeded to the right, observing the flora and fauna that now called this artificial reef their home.

As we made our way forward toward the bow, we passed a sedentary stingray with a two-foot wing span. A group of a dozen triggerfish with characteristic thick lips floated by. Although triggerfish are not indigenous to the Mediterranean, local divers speculate that several species of Red Sea fish migrated to Israel's Mediterranean coast through the Suez Canal. Without any natural

predators there, these species thrive.

A solitary gray mullet eyed us suspiciously as we swam by, and several wrasse darted around the green sea grass.

Before reaching the bow, we ascended to the ship's deck. The railings were aging rapidly, with the metal already rusted through in a few places.

It was then that I stopped dead in my tracks, and realized what they meant when they promised that I was in for a surprise.

Twelve plain, empty chairs were arranged in a semi-circle around a commemorative plaque. On each chair was written the name of a slain commando. It was as if the twelve friends had stopped in the middle of a casual conversation and had walked away for a few moments, never to return again.

The scene evoked a strong emotional response in me.

I watched, floating over the deck railing, as Itamar and Orian took their photos. After a few moments, we resumed the dive. I peered through the open bridge windows, where the captain and crew stations were visible, electric cables still in place.

Toward the rear of the ship, we could see where the missile and gun batteries had been, and saw a shy octopus half-way out of a vertical pipe rising from the empty engine hatch.

After 25 minutes, we began our ascent along the anchor line. During a three-minute safety stop at 15 feet, I took one last look at the wreck below, its bow pointing straight East, toward the homes that the dead servicemen would never see again.

Usually, after surfacing, divers chat excitedly while removing gear and comparing experiences. Not after this dive. Everyone stowed their gear silently, eyes averted.

Yaer, owner of the dive shop, asked us to observe a moment of silence before starting the boat's engine.

On the ride back, one of the Israeli divers, under the condition of anonymity, confided that he had been very close, militarily and socially, with the slain commander memorialized below.

“The commander was a very kind, soft-spoken, nice man,” he reminisced, “We were shocked when we heard of his death.”

One of the other local divers explained to me that Israel is a very small country, almost like on large family, and that everyone feels every casualty very acutely.

It could have been the salt spray in the air, but everyone on the boat seemed to have very moist eyes.