

# Investigation of Abandoned WW II Wrecks in Palau

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## **Abstract**

Over forty Japanese vessels were sunken in the water of Palau during WWII. Some wrecks sunk in the shallow water at a depth of 20 meters or less and were salvaged. Other wrecks at 30 meters depth or more still remain and are legally protected by the authority of Palau Government but are seriously threatened by illegal treasure hunters. Initial efforts to identify human remains of Japanese soldiers were made in 2005. As part of an archaeology advisory team for the Japanese Government I carried out underwater surveys of sunken WWII vessels in Palau. In 2010 and 2011, I conducted investigations of the WWII vessels again, together with on-shore research on sites and features associated with the Japanese occupation period, funded by the Takanashi Foundation for Arts and Archaeology (Japan).

The research revealed that the most of the vessels sunken in Palau were not genuine military vessels of Japanese Imperial Navy or Army but converted vessels originally built for non-combat purposes. These vessels were slow in speed and not well-equipped for combat activity. Most of them were destroyed by American aerial bombing on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1944. The evening before (March 29<sup>th</sup>) the main force of the Japanese Combined Fleet, including its flagship *Musashi*, retreated from Palau. It is clear that the vessels left in Palau were abandoned as a “third wheel” of the Combined Fleet. These abandoned-converted vessels include cargo carriers, tankers, whaling boats and fishing boats. This implies that Japanese troops were experiencing a difficult and desperate campaign at that time.

## **Introduction**

Over forty WWII Japanese vessels have been identified in the waters of the Republic of Palau (see Figures 1, Figure 2, Table 1). Most of them were destroyed on March 30<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> 1944 by the United States of America’s (USA) attack - Operation Desecrate One. This battle was a historical turning point for Japanese occupation in Micronesia because the Combined Fleet of the Japanese Imperial Navy lost their bases in the region, which further impacted on defeats in the Battle of the Mariana Islands on June 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> 1944 and the

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Battle of Layte on October 23<sup>rd</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> 1944. Therefore the shipwrecks of Palau offer important evidence for understanding the historical significance of the battle in Palau. The main aim of my research is to uncover the real situation of the battle in Palau and document the extent of this underwater cultural heritage (UCH) in Palau for their future protection and management.

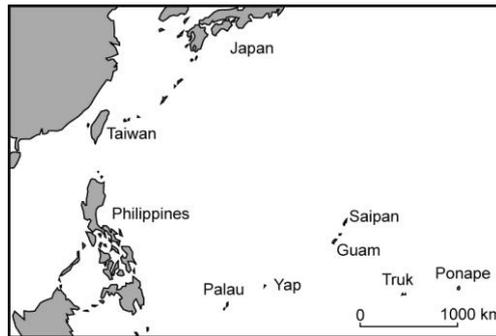


Figure 1. Map around Palau (created by author).

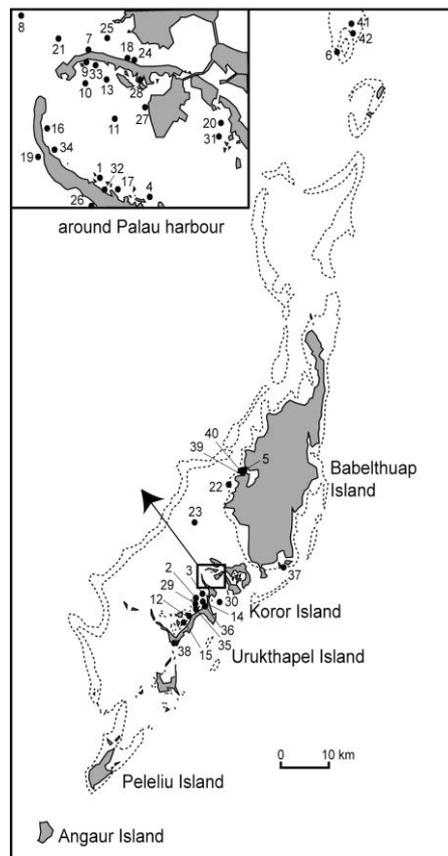


Figure 2. Map of Palau and distribution of Japanese WW II wrecks, insert is map of shipwrecks in Palau harbour (created by author).

Table 1. Details of numbered vessels on Figure 2 (made by author based upon the data from Bailey 1991, Tanaka 2007, and author's research)

No.	Name of Vessel	Type	Affiliation	Tonnage	Length	Destroyed Date	Depth	State
1	Akashi	Navy repair ship	Combined Fleet	9000	158.5	44.03.30	12	SDF
2	Iro	Navy oil tanker	Combined Fleet	14050	143.48	44.03.30	43	SP
3	Sata	Navy oil tanker	4th Fleet	14050	143.48	44.03.30	35	SP
4	Ose	Navy oil tanker	Combined Fleet	7987	138.9	44.03.30	Unknown	SDF
5	Wakatake	Navy destroyer	No. 1 convoy fleet	1113	84	44.03.30	30	SDF
6	Samidare	Navy destroyer	No. 2 destroyer flotilla	2075	105.8	44.08.26	9	SDF
7	LST Type 1	Navy first-class carrier	Combined Fleet	1500	96	44.07.27	35	SP
8	Asashio Maru	Navy first-class oil tanker	Combined Fleet	5141	118.1	44.03.30	40	S
9	LST Type 150	Navy SB carrier	Unknown	950	70.9	Unknown	Unknown	SDF
10	Amatsu Maru	Navy oil tanker (converted)	Nihon Kaiun	10567	153	44.03.30	40	SP
11	Urakami Maru	Navy repair/salvage ship (converted)	Fukuyo Kisen	4317	109.73	44.03.30	35	SP
12	Kamikaze Maru	Navy minelayer (converted)	Yamashita Kisen	4918	111.5	44.03.30	35	SP
13	Chuyo Maru	Army carrier (converted)	Toyo Kisen	1941	82.3	44.03.30	35	SP
14	Nagisan Maru	Navy carrier (converted)	Mitsui Senpaku	4391	110	44.03.30	35	SP
15	Bichu Maru	Army carrier (converted)	Nihon Yusen	4667	112	44.03.30	35	SP
16	Gozan Maru	Navy carrier (converted)	Kuribayashi Shosen	3213	91.5	44.03.30	18	SDF
17	Shoei Maru	Army carrier (converted)	Sanko Kisen	1878	81.5	44.03.30	Unknown	SDF
18	No. 5 Nissho Maru	Navy general-purpose vessel (converted)	Marusho Kaiun	782	54	44.03.30	Unknown	SDF
19	No. 18 Shinsei Maru	Navy oil tanker (converted)	Hara Shoji	2711	96.4	44.03.30	Unknown	S
20	No. 2 Unyu Maru	Army oil tanker (converted)	Tojo Kisen Kogyo	634	53	44.03.30	Unknown	S
21	Raizan Maru	Navy general-purpose vessel (converted)	Tsurumaru Kisen	2838	98	44.03.30	35	SP
22	Kibi Maru	Army carrier (converted)	Hinode Kisen	2759	93	44.03.30	30	SP
23	Teshio Maru	Army carrier (converted)	Mitsui Senpaku	2840	93	44.03.30	30	SP
24	Ryuko Maru	Navy carrier (converted)	Taiyo Kogyo	2764	93	44.03.30	35	SP
25	Goshu Maru	Navy carrier (converted)	Kawasaki Kisen	8592	132.9	44.03.30	20	SDF
26	Akebono Maru	Navy oil tanker (converted)	Nihon Kaiun	10182	151.4	44.03.30	Unknown	S
27	Hokutai Maru	Army carrier (converted)	Kitagawa Sangyo Kaiun	5220	120.1	44.03.30	unknown	SDF
28	Daihatsu landing craft	Landing craft	Unknown	17	14.88	unknown	2	SP
29	Daihatsu landing craft	Landing craft	Unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown	7	SP
30	Buoy #6 Wreck	Submarine chaser (ex- bonito fishing boat)	Unknown	unknown	ca. 30	unknown	25	SP
31	Helmet Wreck	Minelayer	Unknown	unknown	ca. 58	44.03.30	35	SP
32	Unknown	Unknown (ex- whaling boat)	Unknown	ca. 300	ca. 36	unknown	10	SDF
33	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	unknown	unknown	44.03.30	unknown	S
34	Unknown	Unknown (ex- cargo ship)	Unknown	>1000	>60	44.03.30	15	SP
35	Unknown	Unknown (former cargo-passenger boat)	Unknown	unknown	unknown	44.03.30	10	SP
36	Unknown	Unknown (submarine chaser or patrol boat)	Unknown	unknown	unknown	44.03.30	12	SDF
37	Unknown	Unknown (ex- cargo-passenger boat)	Unknown	>1000	unknown	44.03.30	6	SP
38	Unknown	Unknown (ex- cargo ship)	Unknown	unknown	ca. 40	unknown	27	SDF
39	Unknown	Unknown (ex- water tanker)	Unknown	unknown	ca. 36	unknown	12	SP
40	Unknown	Unknown (cargo ship or patrol boat)	Unknown	unknown	ca. 30	44.07.25	3	SP
41	Tugboat Wreck	Unknown	Unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown	2	SDF
42	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	ca. 3000	unknown	44.08.22	3	SDF

State: S=Salvaged completely SP=Salvaged partially SDF=Salvaged completely; debris field

### ***Historical background of the wrecks in Palau***

Since 1920 the Palau Islands had been a part of Japanese Mandated Territory, along with the Mariana Islands and the Western Caroline Islands. In the wake of the defeat over German occupation, the former colonial power over Palau, in the First World War. The Palau headquarters of Nanyocho are the administrative agency of the Nanyo Gunto (Micronesian islands of Japanese Mandated Territory). Located on Koror Island, it played the role of the administrative center for the Territory. In the wake of the Japanese walkout from the League of Nations in 1933, Palau was also regarded as a military site in the Territory and a number of military facilities were built on each island.

The home base of the Combined Fleet, the main force of the Japanese Imperial Navy, was placed on the Truk Islands initially during WWII. However, after the defeat of the Battle of Midway on June 5<sup>th</sup> 1942 the Japanese naval

power in the Pacific region declined. The 58<sup>th</sup> Task Force of the USA conducted the Operation Hailstone which included air strikes on the Truk Islands on February 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> 1944, and the Japanese forces lost two light cruisers (*Agano* and *Naka*) and many other vessels. A week earlier the flagship *Musashi*, and other major vessels of the Combined Fleet, had already retreated to Palau on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February in anticipation of the attack by the USA forces.

The Combined Fleet regrouped their fleet in Palau. On February 29<sup>th</sup> a scout plane of the Japanese Navy sighted a USA task force approaching to the Caroline Islands. Shigeru Fukudome, the Chief of Staff of the Combine Fleet, considered that the U.S. forces would initiate a landing operation to Palau so he decided to withdraw major-force vessels of the Combined Fleet to the Philippines to set them apart for later use (Yoshimura 1976). In the late afternoon on February 29<sup>th</sup> the flagship *Musashi*, the light cruiser *Taiyo*, the destroyers *Urakaze* and *Isokaze*, and the other main vessels of the Combined Fleet set off from Palau Harbor. The rest of the vessels, such as the repair ship *Akashi*, the oil tankers *Iro* and *Sata*, and a number of cargo ships, were left behind.

A two-day USA air strike named Operation Desecrate One initiated On February 30<sup>th</sup>. The remaining vessels were completely destroyed and sunk in the waters of Palau. Most of the wrecks of Palau are derived as a result of this one battle.

### ***Investigations of shipwrecks***

I carried out underwater archaeological survey at six selected sites in 2010 and 2011 (Ishimura 2010a; Ishimura 2010b). Short summaries of the results are shown as follows:

#### **Iro**

Location: West Urukthapel Anchorage

Depth: The ship is resting upright at 40 meters. The deck is at 28 meters and the top of the forward tower is at 8 meters.

Orientation (from stern to bow): Southwest

General Information:

Type: Shiretoko Class Combined Fleet Tanker

Length: 143.25 meters

Beam: 17.68 meters  
Tonnage: 14,050 tons  
Speed: 12 knots  
Built: 1922 by Osaka Tekkosho  
Destroyed on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944

**Brief description:**

The *Iro* was a fleet oiler and supply ship. On March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1944 on her way from the Philippines to Palau a torpedo launched from the submarine *USS Tunny* hitting her bow forward of the bulkheads. On March 30<sup>th</sup> 1944 she came under fire and was bombed during the Operation Desecrate One.

Heavy structural and fire damage to the ship's engine room, boat deck, and stack appears to have resulted from the bomb(s). A survivor of the *Iro* attack witnessed a direct hit to the stroke engine room where approximately 30 engineers were killed (interviewed by author). An anchor chain extends from the hawsehole on the starboard side to the floor of the lagoon below. Following the anchor chain down along the side of the ship one can see the damage caused to the bow by torpedo. On top of the bow is a large gun mounted on a circular platform. The gun barrel diameter is 7 inches (17.8 centimeters) and the length is 4.26 meters. A gun identical to the one on the bow is mounted on a platform on the stern with its barrel pointing about 20 degrees towards the starboard. The survivor of *Iro* related that only one of the guns was able to fire against the aerial attack, due to lack of ammunition (interviewed by author).

In reaction to the information provided by the survivor in 2005 the team of the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare carried out an investigation in search of the human remains of Japanese soldiers at the *Iro*, especially in and around the engine room, however, they were not able to find any (Ishimura 2005).

**Akashi**

Location: North Urukthapel Anchorage  
Depth: Only debris are scattered at a depth of 12 meters.  
Orientation (from stern to bow): North

**General Information:**

Type: Combined Fleet Repair Ship

Length: 158.5 meters

Beam: 20.2 meters

Tonnage: 9,000 tons

Speed: 19.5 knots

Built: 1937-39 by Sasebo Kaigun Kosho

Destroyed on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944

Brief description:

The *Akashi* was the first Japanese Imperial Navy vessel to be designed as a repair ship. The ship was equipped with three large cranes and 144 German machine tools. She was stationed at Truk, where she had been engaged in making repairs on numerous vessels, anchored in the lagoon that had been damaged by USA submarines or air attacks at various island bases. After being damaged by carrier-based aircraft during the two-day Operation Hailstone air strikes on Truk on February 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> 1944, the *Akashi* managed to make her escape and limp to Palau. The *Akashi* could only manage about 12 knots with the damage she had sustained.

When the USA planes initiated their attacks on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 1944 the *Akashi* was anchored offshore of the northern part of Urukthapel Island in Palau Harbor. The captain decided early to move the ship closer to shore into shallow water for more protection against the bombs and torpedoes of the attacking aircrafts (Bailey 1991:123). Even after the war, much of her upper foreship superstructure and masts were above water. It is said that the *Akashi* was scuttled to be a “grounding repair ship” in order to continue her duty even though the ship was totally crippled. The *Akashi* was completely dismantled by a salvage company in 1954 from which a total of 4,500 tons of scrap iron was recovered.

At a depth of 12 meters many artifacts can be found lying on the sandy seabed amongst the debris field; some completely exposed and others with just pieces showing above the sand. The debris field spans around 150 meters in a north-south direction and 20 meters in an east-west direction, displaying the shape of the foregone vessel. A bomb crater can be seen alongside the debris field. Artifacts that have been found and identified include compressed gas cylinders, fire bricks, shoe soles, tires, beer bottles, ceramics and canteens.

## **Amatsu Maru**

Location: West Malakal Anchorage

Depth: The ship is resting upright at 40 meters. The deck is at 30 meters.

Orientation (from stern to bow): Northeast

General Information:

Type: Tanker (converted)

Length: 153 meters

Beam: 20 meters

Tonnage: 10,567 tons

Speed: 15 knots

Built: 1943 by Mitsubishi

Owned by Nihon Kaiun

Destroyed on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944

Brief description:

The *Amatsu Maru* was originally built for the private company Nihon Kaiun in 1943 as a part of the War Standard Construction Program. She was one of 15 vessels of her class that were built as Standard Type 1 TL 10,000-ton steam tanker. She was assigned to the Combined Fleet in January 1944. She is the largest shipwreck in Micronesia and the deepest Japanese wreck in Palau. She was hit directly by several 1000 pound (lb.) bombs. USA Navy archives of aerial photos taken during the attack clearly show heavy smoke rising from the engine compartment (Bailey 1991:79), but the remains exhibit little hull damage.

The bridge was constructed of three decks. The upper-most was the navigational deck and some instruments can still be found there. The wooden walls and floor structures were destroyed by fire or have deteriorated over time. At the stern the twisted remains of a circular gun platform can be seen. The gun was a 12 cm Armstrong-type rapid firing gun but nothing remains of it.

The *Amatsu Maru* was salvaged partially after the war. The Fujita Salvage Company originally sought to raise the ship but later decided to dismantle it instead. During an attempt to cut through the plates, it is believed the flame of a torch hit trapped gases and set off an explosion that killed two men. Then they abandoned the salvage attempt, believing the accident to be an omen of foreboding (Tanaka 2007:51).

## **Chuyo Maru**

Location: West Malakal Anchorage

Depth: The ship is resting upright at 40 meters. The deck is at 30 meters and top of the forward tower is at 12 meters.

Orientation (from stern to bow): Southeast

### General Information:

Type: Cargo ship (converted)

Length: 89 meters

Beam: 12.4 meters

Tonnage: 1,941 tons

Speed: 10 knots

Built: 1943 by Namura Zosenjo

Owned by Toyo Kisen Kaisha

Destroyed on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944

### Brief description:

The *Chuyo Maru* was built as a coastal freighter of the *Amakasu No. 1* or *Goei Maru* class. The ship was completed for the private company Toyo Kisen Kaisha in 1943 and converted into an Army cargo ship soon after. The ship was reported to be initially attacked shortly after 1300 hour (h) on March 30<sup>th</sup> by a 500 lb. bomb, and on the following day an air attack hit the ship on the port side amidship with a single 500 lb. bomb. The ship was reported afterwards to have major fires aboard and then sank at 2000h on April 1<sup>st</sup>.

The bridge structures were burned during the bombing and have since disintegrated, however, remains of the brass compass and ship's telegraph can still be seen. The engine room and boiler room is raised above the main boat deck. Two separate sections of engine room hatches, with a cylindrical steam condenser apparatus between them, can be found above the engine room. A gun stands on a platform on the aft section of the boat deck. The gun is a 1.86-ton, 12 cm dual purpose "Short Gun". This type of gun was typically placed on ships of under 5,000 tons for anti-submarine and anti-aircraft use.

Although the exact location of this wreck was recorded, the wreck was not considered worth salvaging after the war. She was forgotten until April 1989 when wreck hunters Francis Toribiong and Klaus Lindemann rediscovered her. The ship's identity was possible by the discovery of associated ceramics found

aboard the wreck bearing the logo of the ship's commercial owner Toyo Kisen Kaisha (Bailey 1991:131). In May 2006 an English man illegally looted some artifacts from the *Chuyo Maru* and other shipwrecks in Palau and faced two months in jail and a fine of \$ 40,000(USA) (Tanaka 2007:67).

## **Helmet Wreck**

Location: Malakal Harbor

Depth: The ship is resting upright, at the base of a hill, with bow lower than the stern. The bow is in 35 meters and the stern is in 15 meters.

Orientation (from stern to bow): Southwest

General Information:

Type: Cargo ship (probably converted to a minelayer)

Length: 58 meters

Beam: 9.4 meters

Tonnage: Unknown (less than 1,000 tons)

Speed: Unknown

Built: Unknown

Owned by Unknown

Destroyed on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944

Brief description:

The Helmet Wreck, formerly known as the Depth Charge Wreck, is a rare example of an intact shipwreck in Palau. Wreck hunter Dan E. Bailey discovered the ship on January 18<sup>th</sup> 1990. The true name of this ship is unknown and she was not documented in any of the navy archives. Potentially the ship was confiscated in Southeast Asia during the war (Tanaka 2007:89).

On the aft starboard side of the ship a massive explosion tore open the hull revealing the ribs of the ship and scattering drum-like depth charges onto the sea floor. The exposed main-cargo-hold reveals stacks of depth charges neatly arranged on the port side and, due to a massive explosion, scattered around on the starboard side. Under the port upper deck stacks of helmets can be found, now cemented together by decades of underwater corrosion. In the starboard side of another cargo hold are stored two "Lewis-type" machine guns. These apparently were the guns that would normally be mounted on the bases positioned on each side of the bridge. These machine guns were not prepared

for use by the ship's crewmembers. There is a round aft gun platform and the gun barrel is pointing to port amid the mangled steel of the collapsed gun mount (Figure 3). Aboard the wreck was found a ceramic wash-basin bearing the logo of Toyo Toki, a ceramic making company in Japan. This suggests that this ship was renovated to some extent by Japanese.

A two-headed winch is mounted just forward on the bow. The anchor chain extends from the port hawsehole pipe, while the starboard anchor is in its stowed position. This suggests that the ship was anchored close to shore in a group of small coral islets in the south of Aurapushekaru Channel, for the protection against the bombs and torpedoes of the attacking aircraft. On an islet near the sinking point many bullet holes can be seen.



Figure 3. Round aft gun platform of the Helmet Wreck (T.Ishimura).

### **Buoy # 6 Wreck**

Location: Malakal Channel

Depth: The wreck is resting upright near marker # 6 at 27 meters. Deck is 21 meters deep. The hull is perpendicular to southwest slope and the bow is

pointing to the northeast.

Orientation (from stern to bow): Northeast

General Information:

Type: Bonito fishing boat (probably converted to a submarine chaser)

Length: 30 meters

Tonnage: Unknown

Speed: Unknown

Built: Unknown

Owned by Unknown

Destroyed on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944

Brief description:

This small vessel known as Buoy #6 wreck was a bonito fishing boat converted to a submarine chaser. The original name of this ship is unknown, and she is not documented in any of the navy archives.

A pair of outlet conduits can be seen on the portside, which is a feature of bonito fishing boats. A circular gun platform is mounted on the bow but the gun is missing. Two sections of superstructure can be seen amidships.

A survivor of *Iro* related that he was rescued by a group of bonito fishing boats from Yaizu, Shizuoka Prefecture in Japan (Tanaka 2007:87). It is a known fact that, not only, commercial vessels but also many fishing boats were used for military purposes during the War. The ship of Bouy # 6 may have been a member of such a group.

### ***Interpretations and discussion***

The research on the wrecks revealed that most of the vessels sunken in Palau were not main-force vessels of Japanese forces but auxiliary vessels and converted vessels originally built for non-combat purposes. The *Iro* was not an original military vessel but an oil tanker and was not suited for direct combat. In addition, the ship was old and slow in speed. The *Akashi* was heavily damaged by the attack in Truk and hardly managed to escape with the other vessels of the fleet. The other vessels were not genuine military vessels but former commercial vessels such as cargo ships and bonito fishing boats. Some of them have not been documented in military records. This implies that the number of military

vessels were so insufficient that commercial vessels were used for military purpose in the later part of the War.

These vessels were also “slow boats”. They were too slow to catch up with other members of the fleet such as battleships, cruisers and destroyers. They were left behind as a “third wheel” of the Combined Fleet.

Moreover, the vessels were not well-equipped for combat activity. Most of them had only one or two gun turrets to fight against enemy aircrafts. Lack of ammunition forced them to be engaged more difficult battles. Nonetheless, much of the vessels anchored in the harbor and continued intercepting against aircrafts until they sunk. Due to these factors it is considered that this was a suicidal mission, as is the case with the “banzai” and “kamikaze” suicide bombing attacks in battles on Peleliu and other islands in the Pacific region.

The evidence provided here demonstrates the difficulties and the desperate campaign of the Japanese forces in the later part of the WWII. Studies on shipwrecks and other war-associated sites will provide further evidence that are thus far not known to exist in documents.

Underwater investigations on wrecks also indicate the importance of documentation by underwater archaeological methods and implementation of proper conservation management for the UCH in Palau. The vessels and artifacts have deteriorated due to the combined causes of bombing, aging and salvaging activities, therefore it is necessary to record the current state of conservation of these properties. The *Akashi* site also needs to be protected, for a number of artifacts are distributed in the debris field even though the vessel itself has been removed. The Palauan government has designated the WWII wrecks as cultural properties and protects them by law (UNESCO 2010:77); however, some of them are still under threat by illegal treasure hunters, like the case of the *Chuyo Maru*. Such looting activity is impermissible and must cease, since it harms not only the cultural property of Palau but also the dignity of the dead in the wrecks and the sentiments of the bereaved families in Japan.

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