

# wreck rap



Uppermost structure  
of the USS *Oriskany*  
located off the coast  
of Pensacola, Florida,  
USA

Text by Melissa R. Price  
Photos by Melissa R. Price and  
the Florida Department of State

**Divers understand there is something eerily attractive about a ship laying upright on the seafloor. Wreck divers often chase that feeling of curiosity and wonder when exploring undersea environments. While Florida's eastern coast certainly offers countless popular wreck dives, the Panhandle is an often-overlooked gem. The Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail provides an enjoyable mechanism for divers to experience the history and heritage the Gulf of Mexico has to offer within the realm of wreck diving.**

The Trail was launched in 2012 by the Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research (BAR) in response to the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which caused a dramatic drop in tourism to the Panhandle. BAR brainstormed creative ways to boost the economy, especially

where diving and tourism were concerned. Local waterfront communities expressed a need for a diving trail similar to the Florida Keys Wreck Trek located on the eastern coast.

A lengthy data collection process resulted in the selection of 12 wreck

candidates, which were accessible to a variety of certification levels, contained abundant marine life and had plenty of superstructure to explore. The wrecks, which were situated offshore of Pensacola, Destin, Panama City and Port St. Joe, were popular within local com-

munities and succeeded in attracting tourists to the region.

Continued management and promotion of the Trail involved the creation of a website and Facebook page, installation of billboards, distribution of printed material and production of high-quality,

promotional video footage. The videos were produced in the summer of 2018 and contained cinematic interviews with archaeologists, who highlighted various exciting aspects of the wrecks. As a result of these widely distributed and extremely popular videos and other

*The Florida Panhandle*

# Shipwreck Trail

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Divers swim through upper decks of the USS *Oriskany* (right); Barracuda and schools of fish on *YDT-14* (below). Both wrecks are located off Pensacola, Florida.

promotional materials, the Trail received an uptick in interest in 2019. In response, local stakeholders expressed a desire to have more wrecks included in the Trail. So, by the summer of 2020, BAR plans to add eight more vessels to the Trail. Here, the 20 vessels are spotlighted.

### Pensacola

**Three Coal Barges.** These barges broke free from their transport in 1974 while on their way to a designated offshore artificial reef location. To prevent them from washing ashore or causing damage to other vessels, the US Navy sent in its demolition experts to plant explosives on the runaway

barges, effectively sinking them in their present location. The barges rest in 50ft (15.3m) of water and offer plenty of opportunities to practice novice dive skills and enjoy local marine life.

**San Pablo.** Nearby is *San Pablo*, a freighter that originally transported fruit from South America to Boston. The vessel saw action during World War II when it was attacked by a U-boat and sank off Costa Rica. It was refloated and transported to the Gulf of Mexico, where it was eventually blown up in a secret military operation off Pensacola in 1944. Found at a depth of 80ft (24.4m), this freighter invites divers to con-



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sider its intriguing story and history as they explore its boilers, rudder and refrigeration coils.

**Pete Tide II.** Continuing farther offshore is *Pete Tide II*, an offshore oil rig supply ship that carried laborers and provisions to various rigs in the Panhandle. The 166ft (50.6m) long vessel was sunk upright in 100ft (30.5m) of water in 1993. The pilot house and other two decks offer entertaining swim-throughs, with plenty of schooling fish and other marine life.

**YDT-14.** *YDT-14* is close enough to *Pete Tide II* that these dives are often paired. *YDT-14* was a US Navy dive tender vessel in service in the Caribbean and South

Atlantic during the 1940s. This workhorse was sunk as an artificial reef in 2000 in 100ft (30.5m) of water. The upright structure is similar to *Pete Tide II*, with an intact pilothouse and intriguing swim-throughs.

**USS Oriskany.** The final and farthest offshore wreck in this area is USS *Oriskany*, which is quite possibly the most impressive and popular dive site off Pensacola. The largest artificial reef in the world, it served as an aircraft carrier during World War II. The 911ft (277.7m) vessel served in the Pacific Theater, receiving battle stars for its service in the process. It was ultimately repurposed as an artificial reef in 2006 and

rests at a depth of 212ft (64.6m). This immense vessel rises to 80ft (24.4m), offering plenty of structure for divers to explore.

**Fort Walton Beach & Destin Tugboats.** The Fort Walton Beach and Destin areas of the Panhandle are a hot spot for purposefully sunk tugboats. *Miss Louise* was an original 2012 Trail inclusion, but five more tugs were added in 2020.

At a depth of 60ft (18.3m), *Miss Louise* is perfect for novice divers. The 95ft (30m) tug maintains a resident sea turtle and schools of bait fish, which swarm and dance around visitors.

Tugboat “Zuess,” *Mohawk Chief*, *Chepanoc*, *Belize Queen*/

# wreck rap



Resident sea turtle on the wreck of the *Miss Louise*, located off the Fort Walton Beach and Destin areas in Florida (right); Divers in pilot house of the *Pete Tide II* wreck, located off Pensacola (below)



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*Bob Reay Reef*, and *M/V Janet* complete the tugboat highlight in this area. Many of these tugs are associated with concrete and steel artificial reef structures, which add to the diver's underwater experience.

**Thomas Hayward.** Another 2020 addition in this area is the Destin Liberty Ship, also known as *Thomas Hayward*. History enthusiasts will appreciate a visit to this

World War II Liberty Ship, which was active until 1949 and transported allied troops from the United States to Europe.

### Panama City Beach

Panama City Beach contains a number of wartime vessels that now serve as artificial reefs.

**Service tugs.** The *USS Chippewa* and *USS Accokeek* were initially service tugs in the 1940s before

being used as navy training vessels. *Chippewa* was sunk in 1990 in 100ft (30.5m) of water. *Accokeek* was also sunk in 100ft (30.5m) of water, in 2000. Both vessels are intact enough for swim-throughs, and *Accokeek* has a resident goliath grouper.

**USS Strength.** *USS Strength* was a World War II minesweeper that fought in the Pacific Theater, where it found itself in the cross-



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Diver on the bow of the wreck of USS Accokeek, located off the coast of Panama City Beach in Florida





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hairs of a midget submarine and a kamikaze raid. Surviving both, the vessel was eventually sunk off Panama City in 1987. This vessel is not as intact as other wrecks included in the Trail, but it offers an exciting dive for history buffs and marine life enthusiasts alike.

**Black Bart.** *Black Bart* was another offshore oilfield supply vessel that served the Gulf of Mexico. Originally named *Vulcano de Gulfo*, the vessel was sunk as an artificial reef in 1993 in memory of Navy Supervisor of Salvage Captain Charles "Black Bart" Bartholomew. The vessel's wheelhouse was ripped off completely after Hurricane Michael in October 2018, but the open cargo hold still offers swim-through opportunities.

**FAMI Tugs.** The FAMI Tugs also illustrate

the power of Mother Nature. Originally, these two deliberately sunk tugs were situated bow to bow, but after a strong storm, one boat was deposited slightly atop the other.

**El Dorado.** The final vessel in this area, *El Dorado*, is a 2020 addition that provides yet another reminder of Florida's long history with the destructive forces of hurricanes. The unique and quite recently deployed ship was a modern luxury cruise liner that washed ashore in October 2018 after the devastating Hurricane Michael. Its owner donated it as an artificial reef, allowing the community to reap the benefits for years to come, much to the enjoyment of divers and marine life alike, illustrating how an unfortunate situation can lead to opportunity and positive outcomes.

**Port St. Joe**

History enthusiasts will appreciate the final two wrecks, *Vamar* and *Empire Mica*, which were not deliberately sunk as artificial reefs.

**Vamar.** Off Port St. Joe lies *Vamar*, an English-built patrol gunboat. The steamer originally served as a support vessel during Admiral Richard Byrd's 1928 Antarctic expedition before it sank in 1942 under mysterious conditions. Resting in only 25ft (7.6m) of water, this shallow dive offers visitors a chance to experience a real shipwreck scattered across the seafloor, a fascinating juxtaposition to those intact and upright vessels described previously.

**Empire Mica.** *Empire Mica*, a 2020 addition, is accessible via Port St. Joe, Mexico Beach, or Panama City. This British tanker



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Diver at the bow of the wreck of *Black Bart*, located off Panama City Beach, Florida





PLAN YOUR TRIP

BEST TIME TO DIVE

The best time to dive the Gulf is between May and September, when water is clearest (visibility between 18m and 25m) and temperatures average between 24°C and 26°C. During this time, divers will be most comfortable in a 3mm or 5mm wetsuit.

DIVE OPERATORS

Dive charters can be found on the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail Partners webpage: [floridapanhandledivetrail.com](http://floridapanhandledivetrail.com)

These shops offer everything a diver needs to visit these unique wrecks. Most vessels can take at least six divers, with a few in the Pensacola region able to accommodate larger groups and technical divers for visits to USS *Oriskany*.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Many dive shops are close to a suite of hotels on the coast, which offer beautiful beachside vistas and access to lively downtown areas.

GETTING THERE

Visitors can arrive via Pensacola International Airport or Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport. ■

Diver peers under the USS *Chippewa* structure. The wreck is located off Panama City Beach, Florida.

carried fuel for the Royal Air Force during World War II before it was torpedoed by a German U-boat 21mi (33.8km) south of Cape San Blas. While much of the upright structure has since deteriorated due to time and Coast Guard test bombing, the wreck offers a fascinating story and draws many divers to this area. It also serves as a reminder of how close the war was to America's shores.

**Submerged cultural resources**

These structures on the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail represent the brilliance of the Panhandle community in creating unique solutions to a challenge. Most of the vessels included in the Trail were sunk intentionally as artificial reefs because the Gulf of Mexico does not contain the natural reef structure

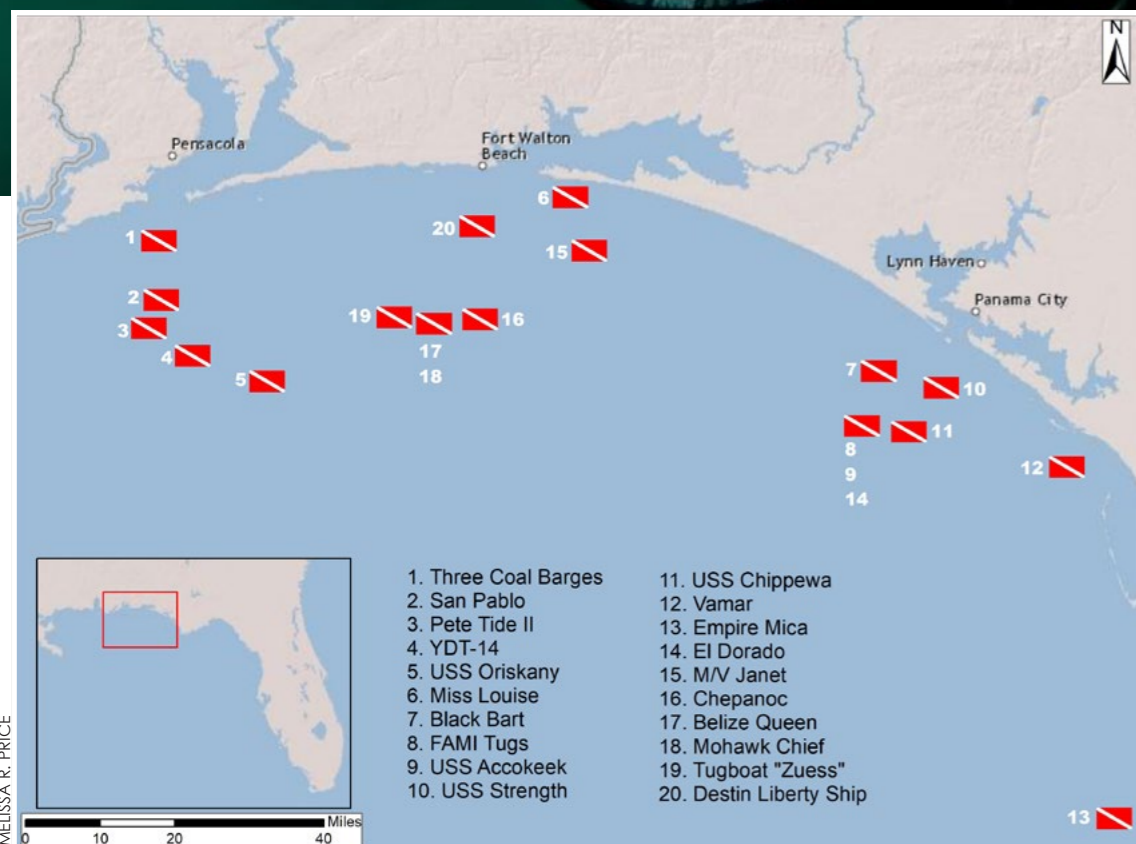
present on Florida's eastern coast. These wrecks-turned-reefs also preserve aspects of Florida's fascinating maritime history, allowing them to continue telling their stories with a renewed life and duty. Because they are pivotal to the marine environment and economy, the vessels illustrate why it is important to preserve and protect submerged cultural resources and underwater environments. Those who observe these vessels in person realize their greater importance and become stewards of their long-term preservation.

Through the Trail, we are reminded to "take only pictures, [and] leave only bubbles." The Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail is the synthesis of recreational, ecological and heritage tourism and promotes responsible visita-

tion to and management of artificial reefs and historic wrecks. The Emerald Coast invites you to make your own memories on the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail. ■

For more information, please visit: [floridapanhandledivetrail.com](http://floridapanhandledivetrail.com). Or follow on Facebook at: [facebook.com/FloridaPanhandleShipwreckTrail](https://facebook.com/FloridaPanhandleShipwreckTrail)

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Map of the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail dive sites

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The newly discovered wreck off Portofino in the province of Genoa, Italy, could turn out to be the Renaissance galleon *Santo Spirito*

## 500-year-old galleon found in Italy

Two divers have discovered a shipwreck that may turn out to be the famed Renaissance ship *Santo Spirito*, a merchant ship that sank in the Camogli Sea in the late 16th century.

During a dive in late February, the two professional divers—Gabriele Succi and Edoardo Sbaraini, from Rasta Divers submarine works company—noticed wood debris on the seafloor at 50m. What they discovered may actually be the remains of a large Renaissance galleon that shipwrecked in a storm in 1579 off the coast of Portofino in the province of Genoa, Italy, said the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage of Liguria in a release, reported by local media. At the time, the city was being ravaged

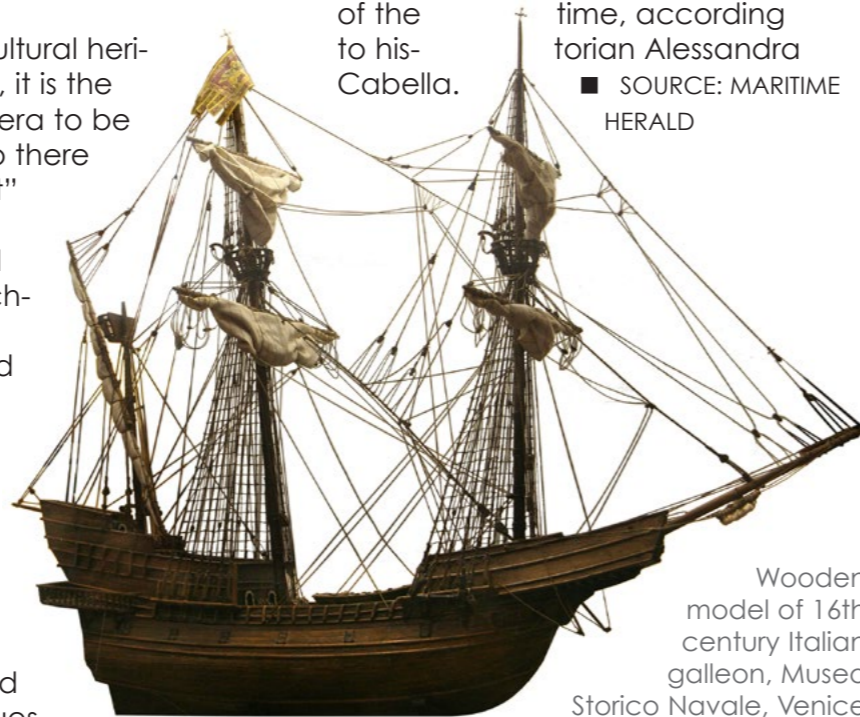
by the virulent Black Death, or bubonic plague, which thwarted rescue efforts.

According to cultural heritage authorities, it is the first ship of that era to be found in Italy, so there is "great interest" in salvaging it.

An international team of researchers has already been assembled to study the remains and artefacts of the wreck, including an identified helmet, which are of great historical value and may provide clues

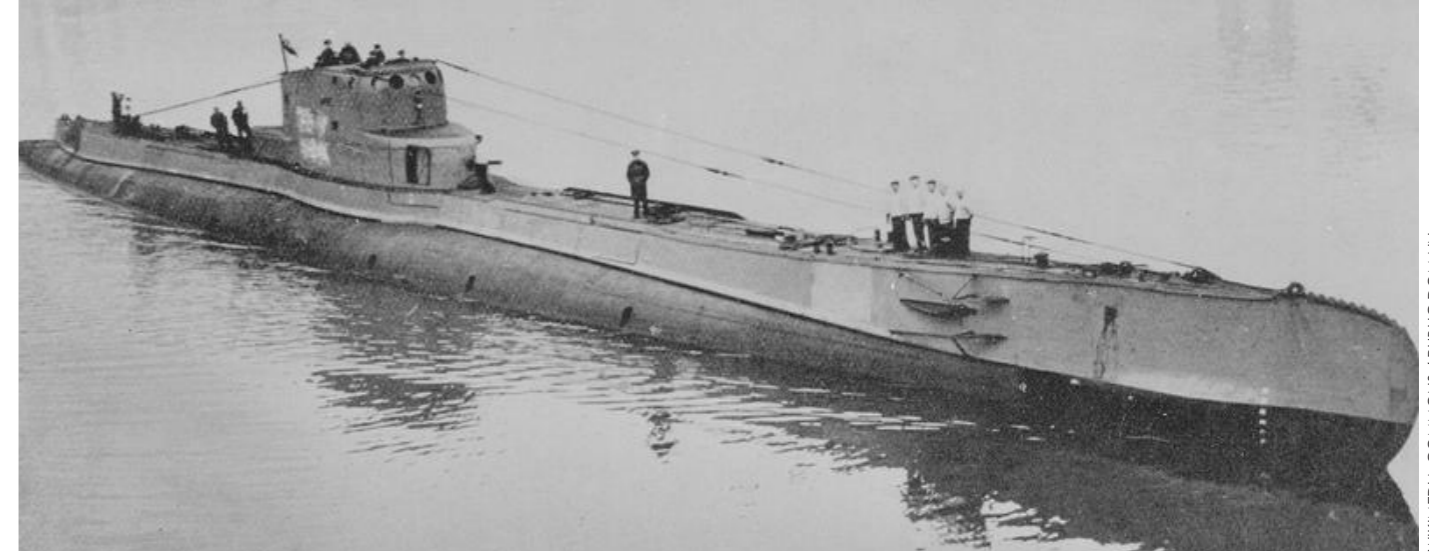
to the little-known early modern era of the Mediterranean as well as details of naval architecture of the time, according to historian Alessandra Cabella.

■ SOURCE: MARITIME HERALD



Wooden model of 16th century Italian galleon, Museo Storico Navale, Venice

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Historical photo of WWII Polish submarine *Orzel*

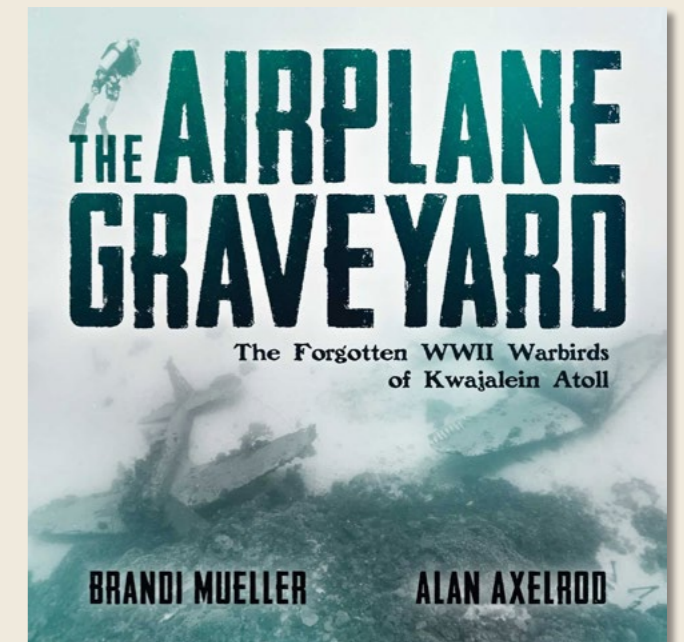
## Search for WWII Polish submarine *Orzel*

An international team of explorers and researchers from the Shipwreck Expeditions Association and the Maritime University of Szczecin in Poland are searching for the allied submarine *Orzel* (*Eagle*) that was mysteriously lost 80 years ago.

It is hoped that with the finding of the *Orzel's* final resting place, the nation may commemorate its sailors with dignity, providing their families with closure. But the task will be a major challenge as the area to be searched is large and conditions in the North Sea can be unpredictable. ■ SOURCE: EIN PRESSWIRE

Sponsored by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland and the Ministry of Maritime Economy and Inland Navigation, the project aims to find the final resting place of the *ORP Orzel*, which, as one of the most modern Polish WWII vessels, was the pride of the Polish fleet.

Built in the Netherlands, *Orzel* was mostly financed by donations from Polish society, which was unheard of at the time. Gaining fame for its daring escape in September 1939 from internment in Estonia without the aid of navigational charts, the *Orzel* managed to flee to Great Britain, through the Baltic and Danish Straits, with only the memory of Lieutenant Marian Mokrski to guide it. Under the command of Captain Jan Grudzinski, the vessel also became renowned in 1940 for the sinking of the German freighter *Rio de Janeiro* in early April. But on 23 May 1940, the sub sailed its last combat patrol, never to be heard from again. Its loss is one of the greatest mysteries of WWII.

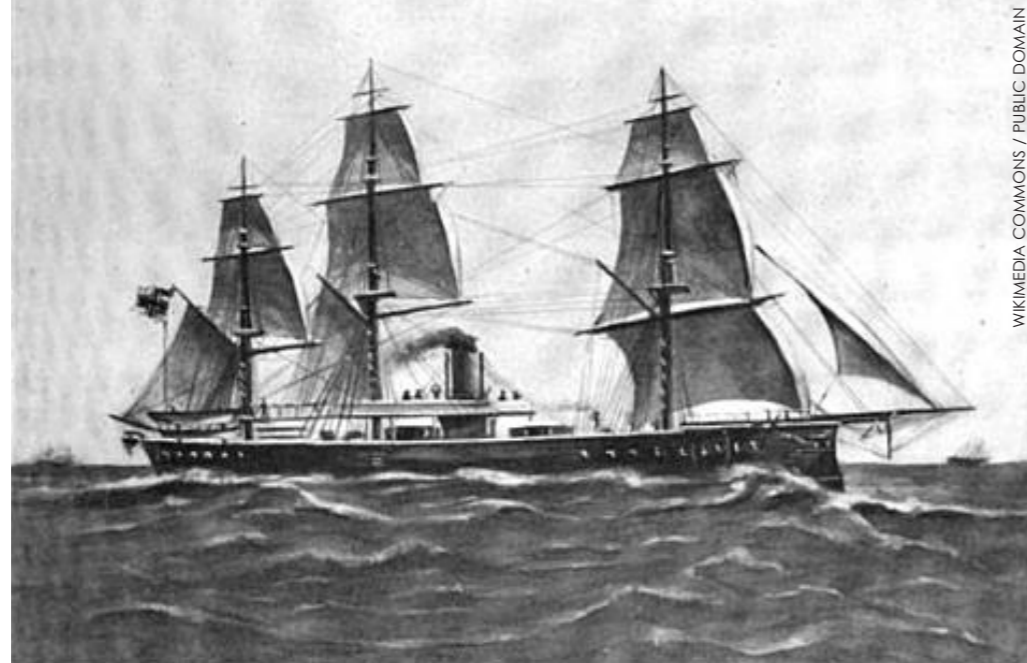


Never before published in book form, see extraordinary images of the forgotten American WWII airplanes resting on the bottom of the Kwajalein Atoll lagoon, from award-winning underwater photographer Brandi Mueller. Available on: [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

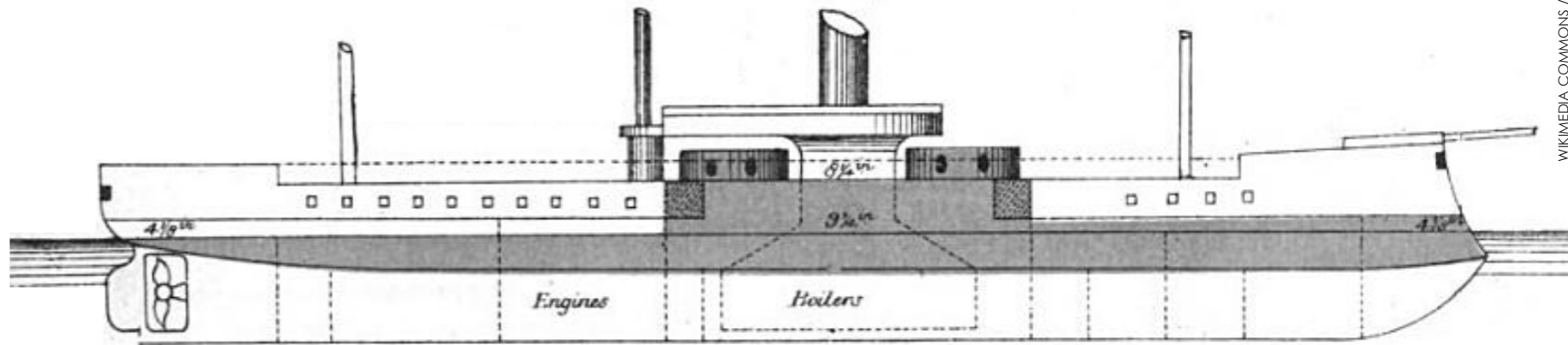
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Historical illustration of SMS *Grosser Kurfürst* underway on her maiden voyage



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Schematic of German Preussen-class ironclad

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# Wreck of ironclad SMS *Grosser Kurfürst* now protected

**The wreck of the 19th century German battleship SMS *Grosser Kurfürst* which sank off the coast of Folkestone, England, in 1878 after a collision with another German ship during naval exercises, has been granted protection by the UK government.**

The wreck of SMS *Grosser Kurfürst* has been given scheduled protection and added to the National Heritage List for England, and the memorial has been given a Grade II listing. Scheduling means that recreational divers would still be allowed to dive the wreck but the new measures would give its contents a level of protection, Historic England said. The SMS *Grosser Kurfürst* is the only non-Royal Naval warship recorded as wrecked in English waters for the period 1860-1913.

SMS *Grosser Kurfürst* was one of only three Preussen-class ironclad warships authorised under the naval programme of 1867, which had been approved by the Reichstag to strengthen the North

German Federal Navy. The design and construction took place during an experimental period in naval warfare when ships moved away from a wooden construction. They also saw the brief return of the ancient ram, used to cause damage to enemy ships. She was laid down at the Imperial Dockyard in Wilhelmshaven in 1870 and only completed in 1878; her long construction time was in part due to a redesign that was completed after

work on the ship had begun. During its construction The SMS *Grosser Kurfürst* was modified to mount a pair of revolving twin-gun turrets amidships.

## Sunk on maiden voyage

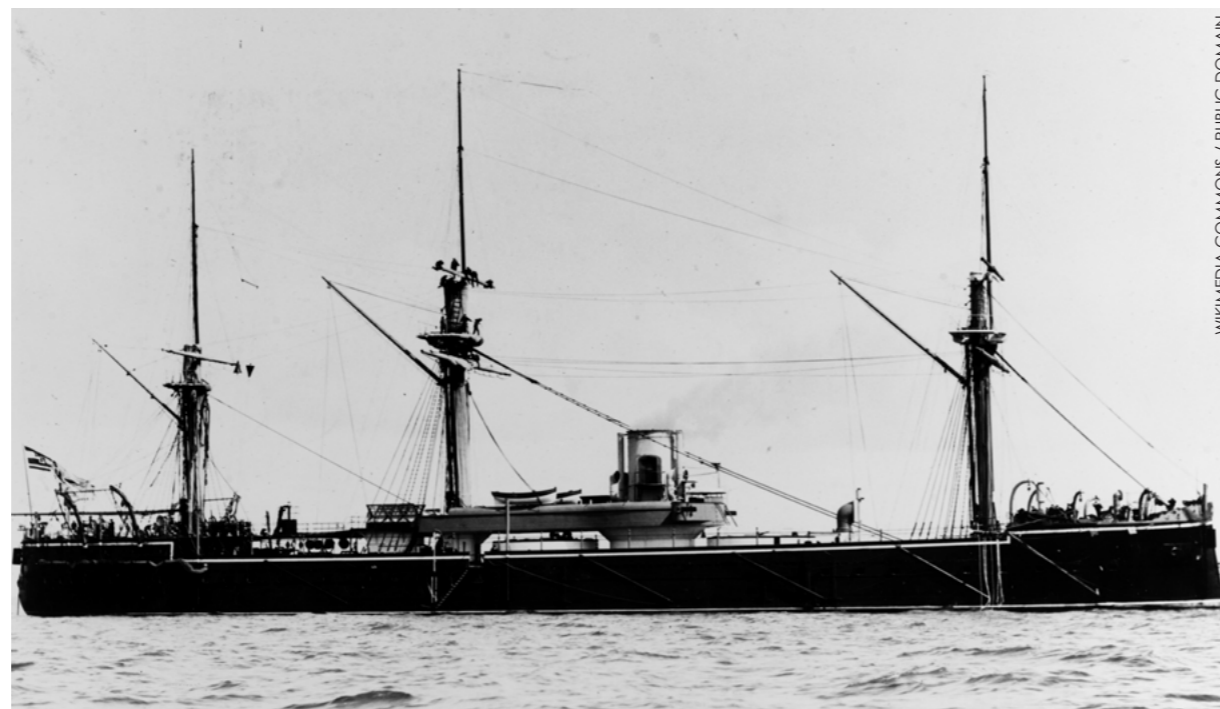
*Grosser Kurfürst* was sunk on her maiden voyage. The warship was preparing for annual summer training sessions in the English Channel in May 1878 when it was accidentally rammed by another Ger-

man warship, the armoured frigate SMS *König Wilhelm*, which was a sail-equipped, broadside-firing type of ironclad.

The *König Wilhelm* was turning to avoid colliding with a pair of sailing ships when its strengthened ram bow, designed to sink enemy ships, ripped away armour plating and gouged a huge hole in the

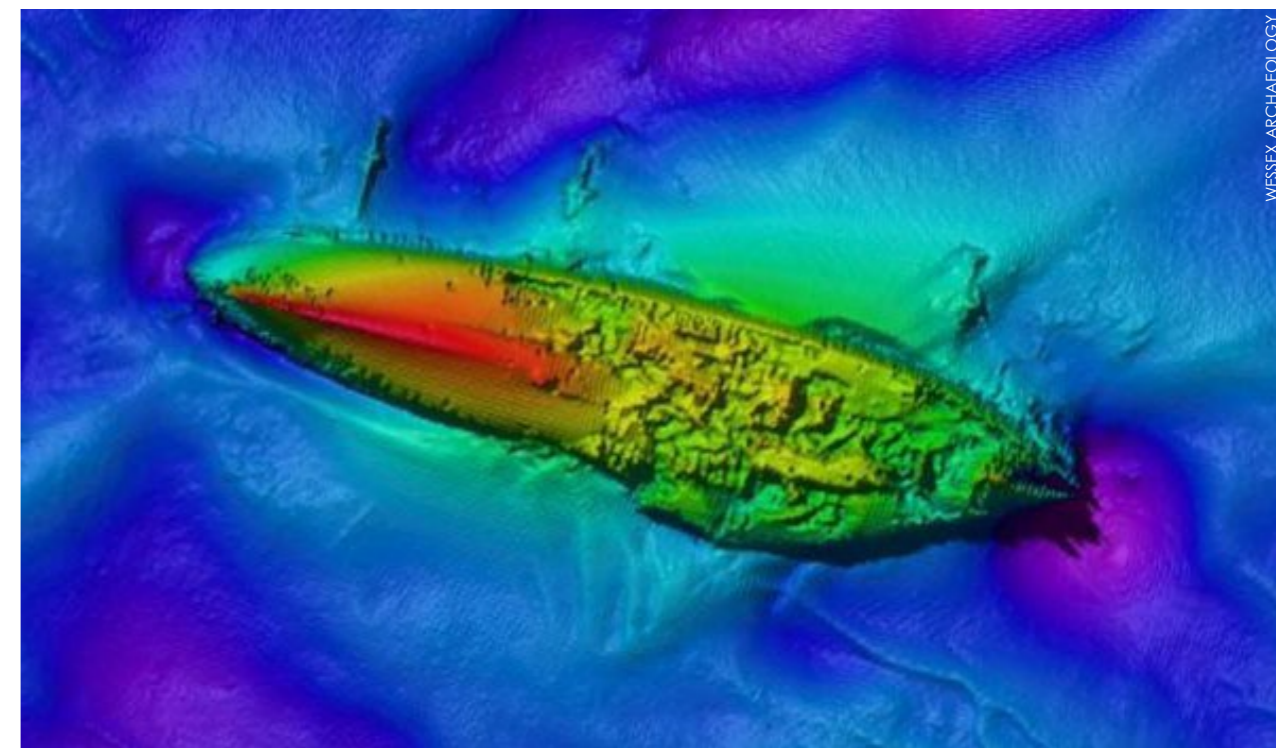
side of *Grosser Kurfürst*, which rapidly sank with the loss of 284 men.

Many of the sailors who lost their lives on 31 May 1878 were recovered and buried in Cheriton Road Cemetery in Folkestone, where a large memorial stands in their honour. ■ SOURCES: HISTORIC ENGLAND, WESSEX ARCHAEOLOGY



Sister ship SMS *Preussen* in 1887

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Multibeam sonar image of the SMS *Grosser Kurfurst*, which sank and now rests upside down off Folkestone at a depth of 30m

WESSEX ARCHAEOLOGY