Hardware covered with *corynactis*, which decorates the entire wreck of the *Californian* (right); Bow of the wreck, with the starboard anchor lying on the sand (below)

Californian Wreck

— Early 20th-Century Steamer in the Gulf of Biscay

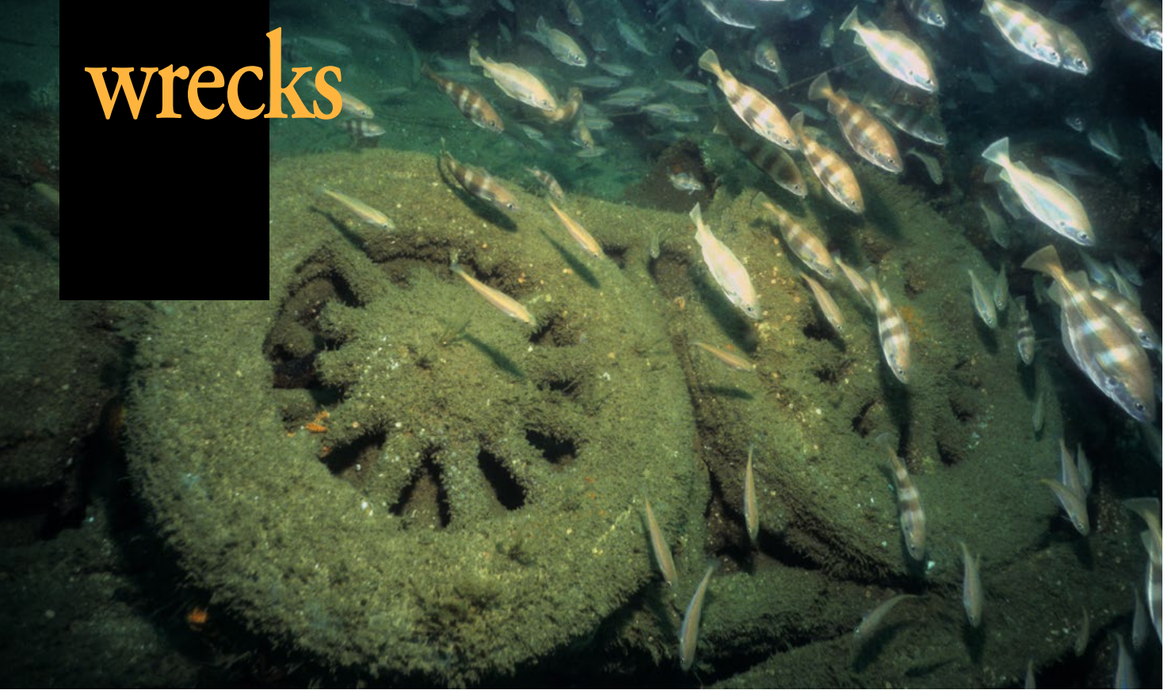
Text and photos by Pascal Henaff
Illustration by Hervé Marsaud
Translated by Loïck Penhoat

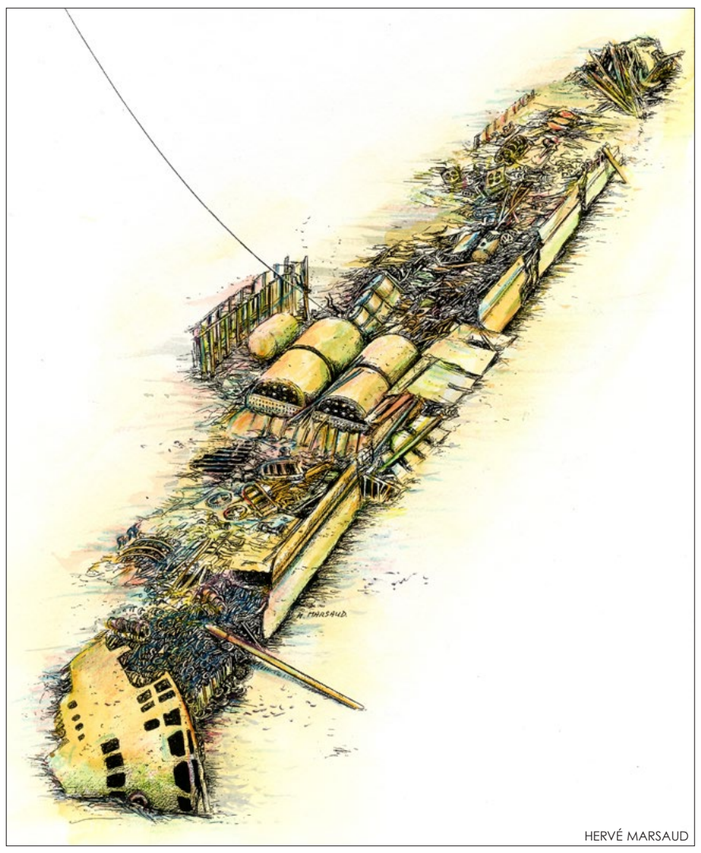
The *Californian* was an American steamship built in 1900, which sank in the Gulf of Biscay, off the coast of France, in 1918, during a WWI convoy. Pascal Henaff has the story.

USS *Californian* was a steamer built by Union Iron Works in San Francisco and launched on 12 May 1900 for the American-Hawaiian Steamship Co. It measured 125.88m in length, 15.54m in width and had a draft of 6.71m, with a tonnage of 5,658 tons, and a speed of 10 knots. Four boilers fed its triple-expansion engine.

The ship we are dealing with in this article is not the *Californian* that did not respond to the *Titanic*'s distress calls in April 1912, but a different ship, which sank in the Gulf of Biscay in 1918.

On 13 May 1918, the *Californian* was requisitioned and placed under the control of the Naval Overseas Transportation Service (NOTS). She was commanded by Captain D. Mulman. Loaded with coal, oil and military equipment (such as truck chassis and spare parts, wheels, radiators and a lot of ammunition) for American troops in France it joined an off-





Sketch by Hervé Marsaud of the actual wreck as seen on a dive

Some of the numerous truck wheels found all over the wreck of the *Californian* (above); Diver on large section of the deck on the starboard side, close to the boilers, now resting in a vertical position (right); USS *Californian* sinking in the Gulf of Biscay on 22 June 1918 (lower right)

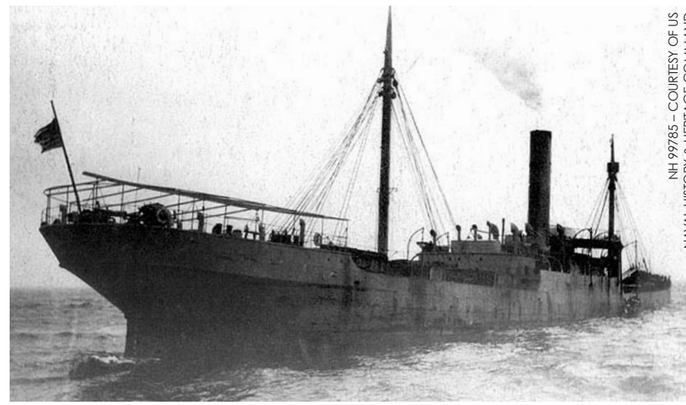
shore convoy departing from New York, which was about to cross the Atlantic that month.

On 22 June 1918 at 5:05 p.m., the "HB" convoy sailed southeast in the Gulf of Biscay, at a cruising speed of 9.5 knots. In four columns of two ships each, escorted by four American yachts and two gunboats, the convoy proceeded under a light northwestern breeze and clear skies. The captain of *La Belliqueuse* at the end of the convoy noticed that one of the carriers was nosing down. He ordered the lifeboats to be lowered. The whole crew was transferred aboard the *Corsair*, a 91m-long, 1,600-ton frigate fitted with four 75mm cannons. The commanding officer was Captain T.A. Kittinger.

At 5:32 a.m., a group of sailors returned on board for 23 minutes in an attempt to start the engine. Between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m., there was hope that the vessel could be towed, but this failed too. The *Californian* sank, prow first. At 9:03 a.m., its stern vanished and went down 46m below. The convoy then proceeded towards La Pallice.

La Belliqueuse tried, with no avail, to spot a possible submarine. So, it was thought that the *Californian* had hit a mine. But there had been no sign of an explosion—no sound was heard, nor was a plume of water seen.

The *Californian's* bearing is 46° 14' 112 N / 02° 12' 098 W, located 23.6 nautical miles southwest of Les Sables-d'Olonne France, in the Gulf of Biscay. The average depth of the wreck is 44m.



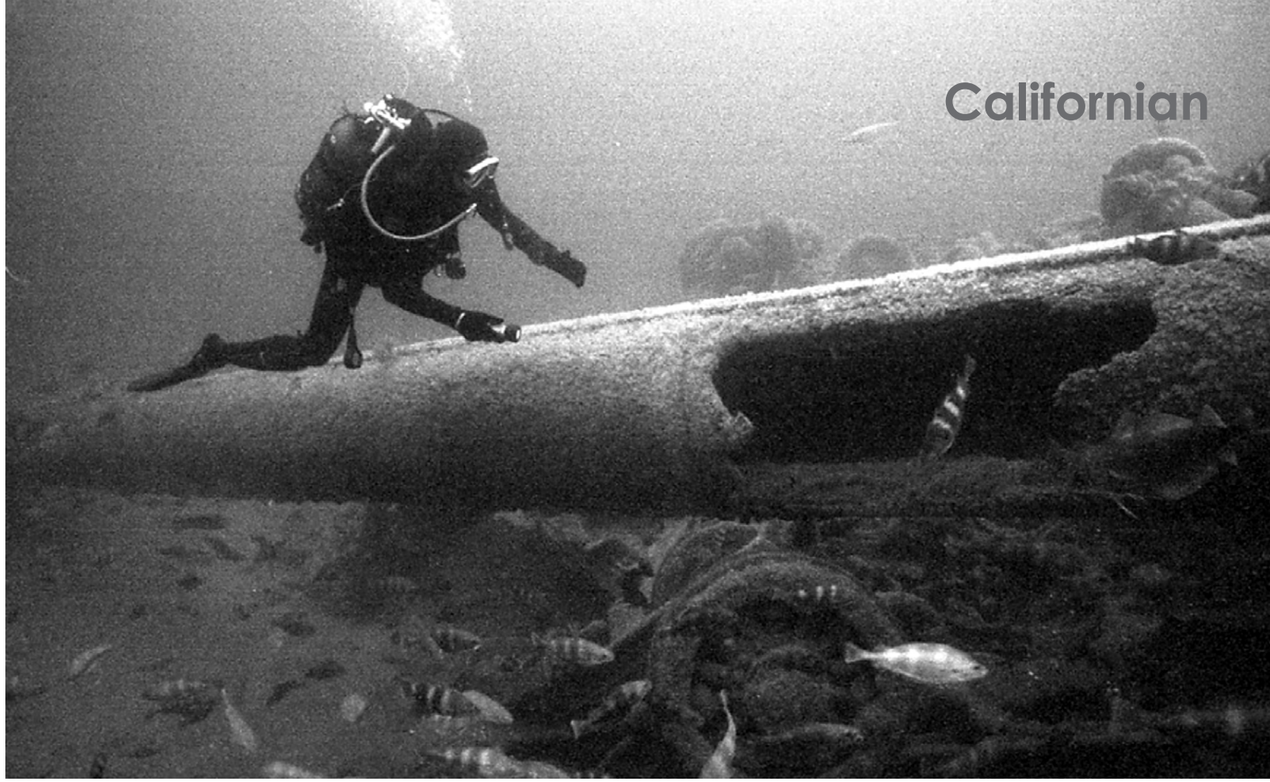
NH 99785 – COURTESY OF US NAVAL HISTORY & HERITAGE COMMAND

Diving the wreck

This large wreck is spread over a large area, with lots of nooks, corners and a varied cargo to explore. It is impossible to go all around it in just one dive.

Let's now take a tour of the wreck from stern to bow. The poop deck on the port side, though destroyed, can be identified thanks to the quadrant, rudder stock and tiller. The helm is buried in the sand, as is the propeller. A few metres away, the perfectly aligned blades of a safety propeller can be found.

In order not to get lost, let's swim along the hull on the port



A large gear wheel whose purpose remains unclear (right); Front mast lying on the port side of the wreck (far right); Wood deck of the bow of the wreck, lying on its port side (below)

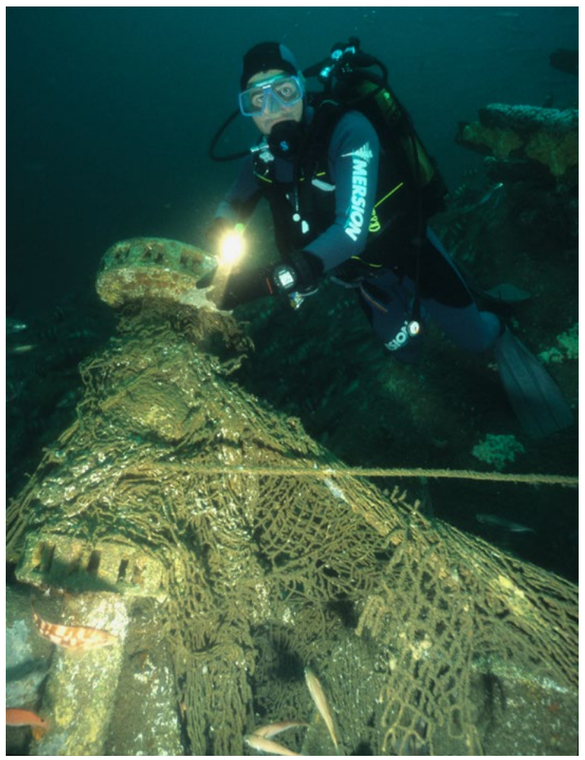
side, which is nearly undamaged. At a height of 3m, it towers over the sandy bottom. Next to the poop deck, the blades of the safety propeller are arranged head to toe, parallel to each other, ready to be bolted, if needed.

For adventurous divers, the cargo can be explored while heading for the engine. The propeller shaft hidden under a heap of supplies is hardly visible. There are davits, winches, three huge gear wheels, a condenser, and a thousand mortar shells. One should avoid disturbing these shells, as some may still contain "trinitrotoluol." The captain of *La Belliqueuse* warned us that it was probably TNT, explosives or even dangerous gas.

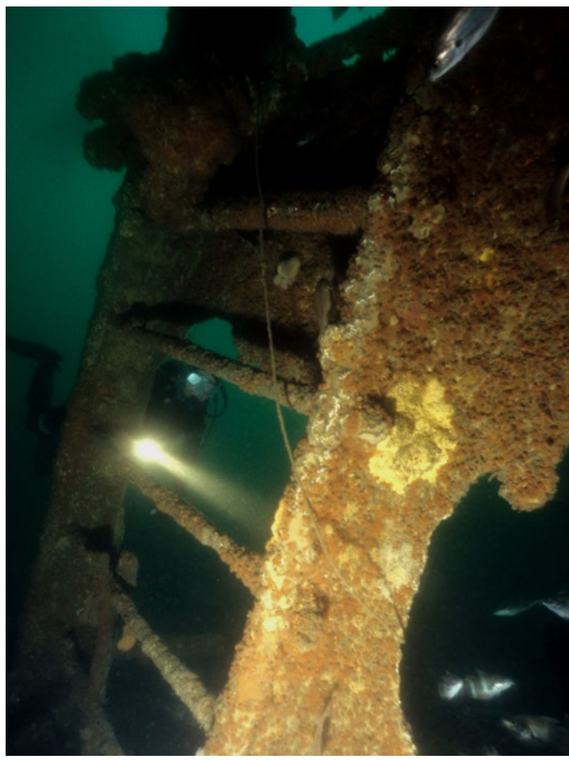
The engine lies on the starboard side, and the cylinder heads can easily be seen. On its base, slightly to port, rests a condenser showing its cooling tubes. The four boilers, disposed in pairs, have their furnaces facing forward for the two at the front, and backward for the two at the back, but they are not easy to spot, being hindered by scrap. An auxiliary boiler, which is small in comparison, rests at the foot of an impressive piece of the ship's deck, standing upright on the bottom. The polychromatic whole of the ship is covered with *cliona* and *corynactis*.

As we proceed with our visit, we come across deck frames, hold entrances, gear wheels, davits on the starboard side, crates of shells, tyres and lorry radiators. Two huge winches break the monotony of that mess of metal scrap. This is where the steps to the cargo boom is. The seven- or eight-metre boom lies on the starboard side, away from the wreck.

From there, one can swim under the deck for 20m in the

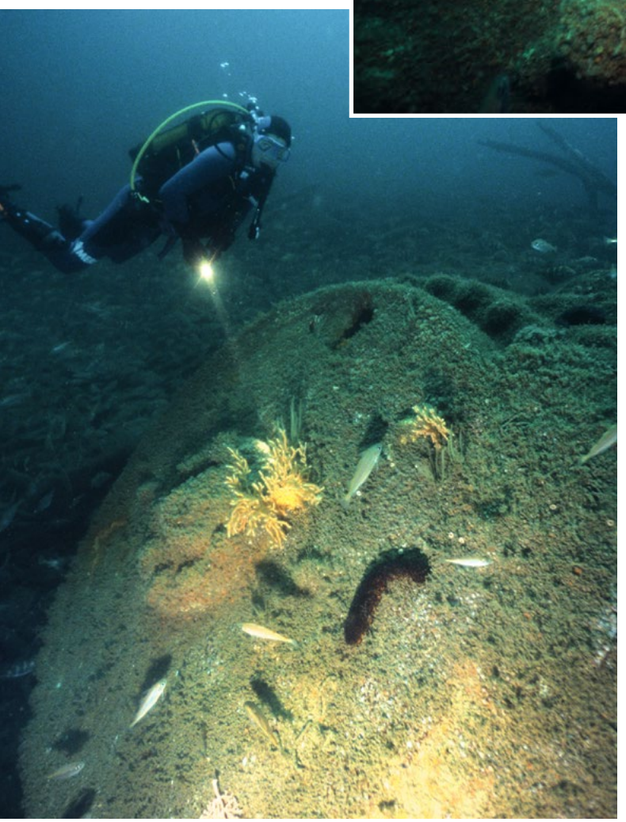


Diver with the rudder stock, which is one of the only recognizable parts at the stern



Inside the bow where some internal parts are still visible

Top of the smaller cylinder of the engine, which is lying down on the starboard side (right); Top of the main cylinder of the triple expansion steam engine (below)



direction of the stern, among sea bass, *tacaud* (pouting) and pollack, and then get out before the boiler zone. Somewhere in that mess described above, it is still possible, in two specific places, to discover heaps of small lead slugs, which have already been partly plundered.

We eventually get to the vessel's bow. That is the part not to be missed; it is nearly detached, and it has fallen portside. The whole section is no longer on the axis of the wreck. At the moment the *Californian* struck the bottom, under the strain, it probably was oriented portside. On the deck, anchor chains spill out of the hawseholes. Lots of light come through the gaping holes of the hull, making it easy to penetrate inside. To gain a full picture of such a wreck, several dives are necessary. ■

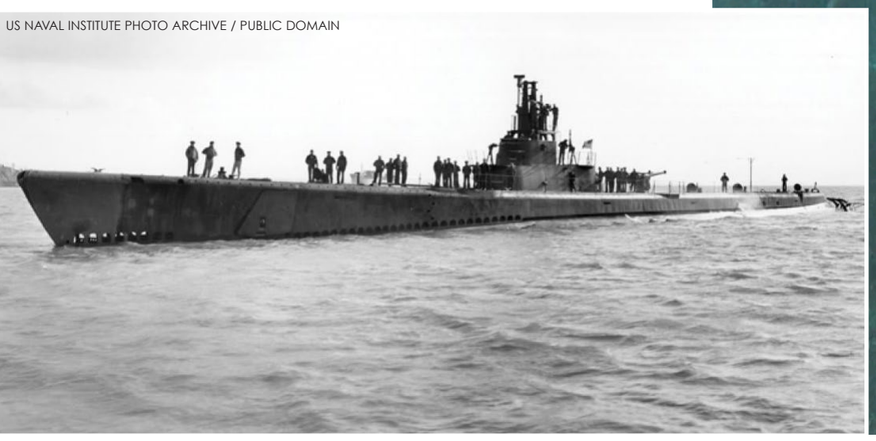
See the video of the Gulf of Biscaye's wrecks off Les Sables-d'Olonne by Pascal Henaff on YouTube, with video of the Californian *at:* ***youtube.com/watch?v=YeOaakV5LtI***.

Pascal Henaff has been a diver since 1975 and an underwater photographer since 1989. He has written articles for dive magazines since 1995. Today, he specialises more on wreck reportage. Visit his website at: ***wildseapictures.com***.

Hervé Marsaud has been a diver since 1990. He is a retired professor of applied arts in a technical high school, as well as a maritime history buff. Visit his website at: ***sites.google.com/site/hervemarsaudphoto***.

Marsaud and Henaff's book, 60 épaves en Vendée et Charente-Maritime, *is still available on* ***Amazon.com***.

Diver and wreck lover Loïck Penhoat, who translated the text, is a retired teacher who has worked abroad.



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NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND (NHHC) VIA PRESS RELEASE

A row of vent holes along the top of the superstructure, and the absence of steel plates along the upper edge of the fairwater allowed NHHC's Underwater Archaeology Branch (UAB) to confirm the wreck site finding as *Albacore* (right); Historical photo of USS *Albacore* (below)

Wreck site identified as World War II submarine USS Albacore

The long-lost wreckage of a US Navy submarine, credited with sinking nearly a dozen enemy ships during World War II before vanishing in late 1944, has been found off the coast of northern Japan, according to US Navy officials.

The US Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC) confirmed the identity of a wreck site off the coast of Hokkaido, Japan, as USS *Albacore* (SS 218). The NHHC made the announcement on Thursday, after several months of examining Japanese surveys conducted on the site in 2022.

The missing and presumed-lost sub was discovered off the coast of northern Japan by a team using autonomous underwater vehicles. The submarine disappeared in November 1944, on its 11th war patrol, likely after striking a mine.

Indications of documented modifications made to *Albacore* prior to its final patrol, such as the presence of an SJ Radar dish and mast, a row of vent holes along the top of the superstructure, and the absence of steel plates along the upper edge of the fairwater, allowed NHHC's Underwater Archaeology Branch (UAB) to confirm the wreck site finding as *Albacore*.

Disproportionately significant role

During World War II, the United States first utilized submarine warfare to effectively cripple its enemy. Although they comprised less than a mere two percent of the US Fleet, submarines played a disproportionately significant role in the victory over Japan. At the outbreak of the war, American submarines were ineffective due primarily to lack of experience; however, from 1942, they began to play a major part in the war.

USS *Albacore* (SS-218) was only in service for just over two years when the vessel disappeared off one of Japan's northernmost islands. The last time the crew of more than 80 was last heard from was reported to be in late October 1944, during stops at Pearl Harbor and the island of Midway. Just over a week later, a Japanese patrol boat reported seeing a great deal of oil amidst a debris field not far from Hokkaido, Japan.

War grave

While non-intrusive activities such as remote sensing documentation on US Navy sunken military craft are allowed, the wreck represents the final resting place of sailors who gave their lives in defence of the nation and should be respected by all parties as a war grave. ■ SOURCE: NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

ARTWORK COURTESY BOB MCGREEVY VIA PRESS RELEASE

"This is a pretty significant shipwreck … considering its age, the fact that it is a barquentine and we can't overlook the vessel's checkered past. The wreck site is littered with shovels too … and a few dinner plates, which speaks to their work and shipboard life."
— Shipwreck Society Executive Director, Bruce Lynn

"Bad Luck Barquentine" shipwreck from 1869 discovered in Lake Superior

The 144ft barquentine named *Nucleus*, which has been discovered 600ft below the surface of Lake Superior, more than 150 years after it sank, is one of the oldest ships to have been recovered from the lake.

The 144ft *Nucleus* had a "checkered past" after previously sinking twice, and once rammed and sank another boat on Lake Huron, the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum said in a news release announcing the discovery.

A barquentine is a sailing vessel with three or more masts, with a square-rigged foremast and fore-and-aft rigged main, mizzen and other masts that were common in the 19th century.

The wooden ship is well-preserved and in good condition, with an intact stern and port side. The wood is free of invasive zebra mussels, which have not been disbursed through the frigid depths of Lake Superior as they have in other lakes.

The *Nucleus* sank on 14 September 1869 when it was downbound from Marquette, carrying a load of iron ore. It got caught in a bad storm on Lake Superior and started to take on water. The leak became so bad that the crew had to abandon the ship and get into the lifeboat.

Checkered history

The Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society dubbed the *Nucleus* the "Bad Luck Barquentine" based on the vessel's checkered history of accidents and sinkings before its last one. During its life service, the *Nucleus* sank twice, ran aground twice and had its cargo damaged. In 1854, it rammed and sank the side-wheeler SS *Detroit* in Lake Huron.

Researchers first found the remains of the *Nucleus* in the summer of 2021, using the same type of surface-operated marine sonic equipment used by underwater surveyors and archaeologists. The wreck was positively identified as the *Nucleus* in 2022 when researchers examined it underwater with a remotely operated vehicle. ■

SOURCE: GREAT LAKES SHIPWRECK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

French destroyer *Dague* off the coast of Montenegro

Montenegro establishes maritime archaeology research unit

The Laboratory of Maritime Archaeology is the first maritime archaeology research unit in Montenegro tasked with illuminating and making the underwater cultural heritage of Montenegro accessible to the public.

The goal of the Laboratory of Maritime Archeology is to position Montenegro on the international scientific map of maritime and underwater archaeology and to investigate and document the shipwrecks, navigation routes, harbours, anchorages and other remnants of human activity along the Montenegrin coast.

Maritime archaeological finds within the Montenegrin basin, although insufficiently explored, are very diverse.

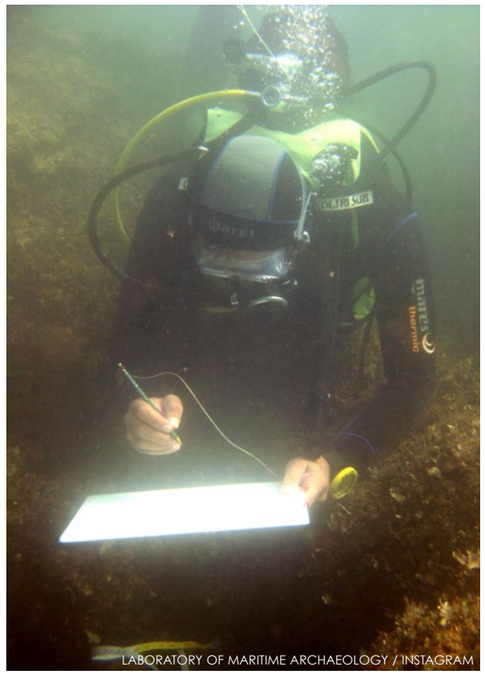
Mission

The mission of the laboratory's project "Underwater cultural landscapes of Montenegro" is to illuminate the various cultural aspects of the underwater cultural heritage of Montenegro and make them accessible to the general public through a multidisciplinary approach using the newest available technology.

The primary objective of the project is to document and interpret sites using 2D and 3D digitalisation methods and create a database that would be publicly available through online geoportal, various platforms and virtual museum websites.

The project will disseminate its cultural and historical messages through various media channels, promoting underwater cultural assets and targeting tourism development. ■

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF MONTENEGRO



Underwater documentation of an archaeological site in Montenegro

A Merlin engine from a Supermarine Spitfire MK IX Trop, which crashed into the sea not far from Cape Kabala in Boka Kotorska Bay