wreck rap

At 100m, Andrea "Murdock" Alpini and Fabrizio Pinna explore the port side of UJ-*2208*, located off the coast of Genoa in Italy.

Exploring the Wreck of UJ-2208 *the WWII Battleship at Genoa*

MARCO MORI

Text by Andrea "Murdock" Alpini
Archive photo research by Andrea "Murdock" Alpini
Underwater photos by Marco Mori

This is the incredible story of the French trawler that was turned into the German submarine fighter UJ-*2208* during WWII and sunk by a British submarine off the coast of Genoa in 1944. Nowadays, the UJ-*2208* lies on the seabed at a depth of 108m, covered in Mediterranean mud, fishing nets, shrimp and oysters. A must-see wreck in Italy, it encapsulates a piece of history and presents a stunning adventure to experience on a deep technical dive.

The submarine fighter UJ-*2208* was originally built in 1926 at Saint-Malo in France by Ateliers & Chantiers De Bretagne at the request of French shipowner Eugène Lemoigne who launched it as FV *Alfred*, an offshore fishing trawler. The gross tonnage of the ship was 966 tons, with a length of 65m, a width of 9.8m and a draught of 3.9m. The propeller was powered by a triple expansion steam engine, which generated a speed of 10.5 knots.

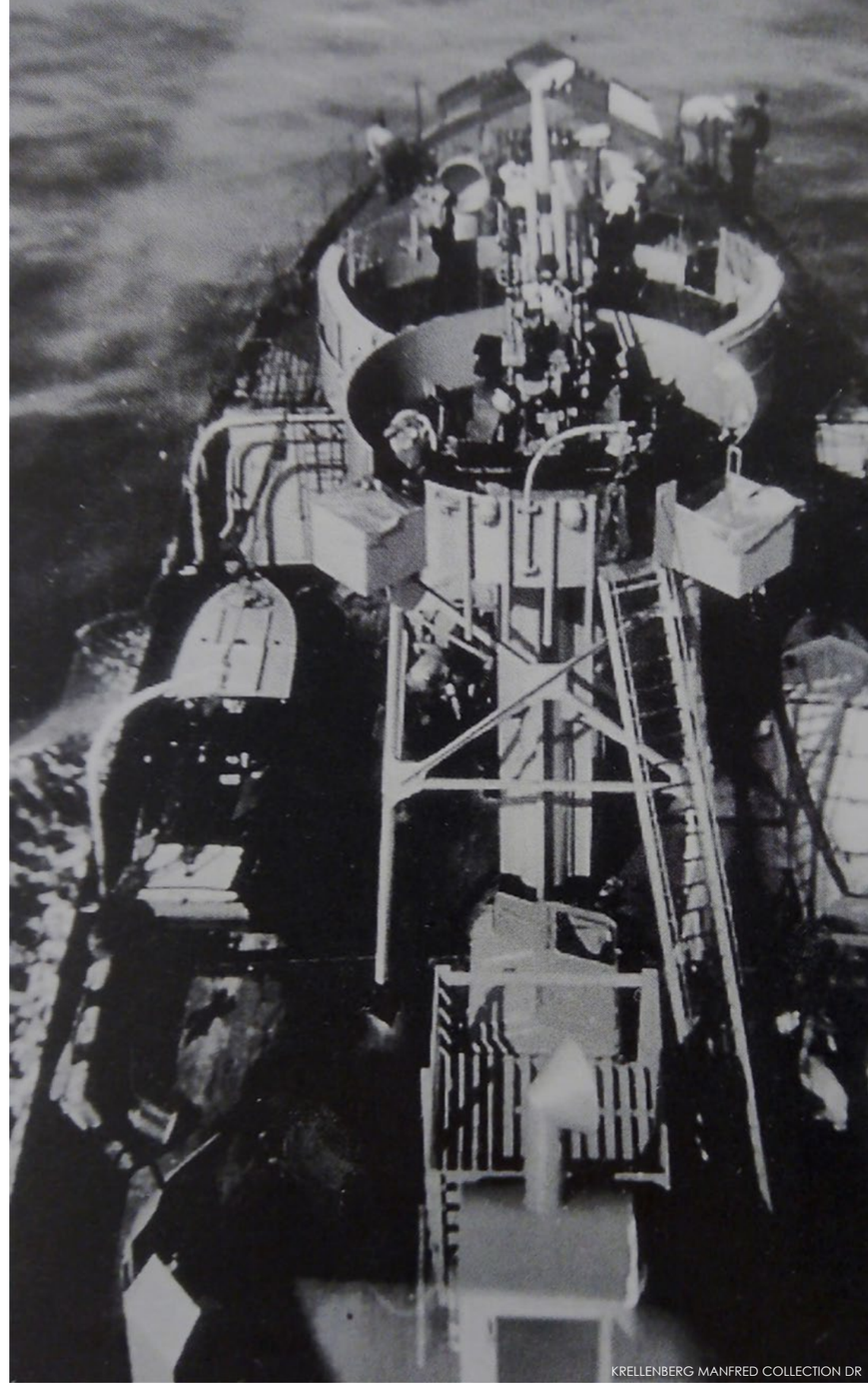
In 1933, the trawler was sold to brothers Jean Baptiste and Victor Pleven. The new owners sailed their new boat until 1939. When WWII struck in France, the French Navy confiscated the ship and converted the *Alfred* into an armed cargo vessel, which was rebaptized as *Alfred P-129*.

The new warship sailed under this name until 1942, when the German Kriegsmarine (navy) converted this ship into its final form: the submarine fighter UJ-*2208*.

On 3 October, the British submarine HMS *Sickle* resurfaced from its depth at sea to torpedo the German submarine fighter UJ-*2208*. The *Sickle* launched a torpedo, which missed its target, and then started to submerge again. Meanwhile, the navy gun operator on board UJ-*2208* made a mistake in pinning the correct position of the *Sickle*. The battleship made it to the end of its first day in battle.

The following day, the UJ-*2208* was again under enemy fire. This time it was HMS *Usurper* (P56) that targeted the unlucky German warship. The *Usurper*

Historical photo showing the bow of the submarine fighter UJ-*2208,* during a mission in WWII (right); Archival photo of the fishing trawler *Alfred* before it was converted into the submarine fighter UJ-*2208* (below)



KRELLENBERG MANFRED COLLECTION DR

was active in the Gulf of Genoa. It had the notable dimensions of 58.22 x 4.88 x 4.42m and was equipped with four torpedo tubes in the bow section and a machine gun on the main deck. The submarine was built in 1941 by the Royal Navy at the Welsh shipyard of Vickers Shipbuilding & Engineering, Ltd.

The *Usurper* had left Algiers on 24 September 1943 with the directive to reach La Spezia (a Ligurian harbor and military base) to refuel. On 3 October, the commander of the British unit received the order to travel to the Gulf of Genoa for a mission. The second part of the directive was to go back to the base in Algiers on 12 October. The *Usurper* would never return.

The dynamics of the clash was not entirely clear, but the UJ-*2208* reported in its captain's log that on 4 October 1943, it clashed with an enemy submarine at the coordinates CJ 1345 (44°15'N, 09°06'E, approximately). Most likely, the submarine was the *Usurper*, but it is not certain. In fact, one source mentioned the British submarine was lost due to hitting a mine, while another source reported that it was sunk by UJ-*2208*, which released 69 depth charges from the stern side, between 9:56 and 11:55 am. The *Usurper*, captained by David Roger Oakeley, sank into the dark blue waters of the Ligurian Sea with its crew of 35 young sailors. To this day, the *Usurper* has never been located on the seabed. The British Navy officially reported the sub: "Missing on October 1943."

On 20 February 1944 at 7:23 p.m., the UJ-*2208*, under the command of Oscar Schmidt, accidentally struck a mine, which was left by its own navy, the German Kriegsmarine. It was a real disaster; 61 of the crew lost their lives. The collision with the mine split the battleship into two. Today, the stern and bow lie more then 160m apart from each other, in the muddy seabed. The bow portion of the wreck measures about 25m, and the stern is about 35m long, more or less. The central part of the ship exploded into a thousand fragments. During the explosion, one more ship was involved: the Italian SS *Nina*, which sank to a depth of 116m, and rests precariously balanced on a slope close to the edge of the abyss. At any rate, SS *Nina* is another dive story that deserves to be told.

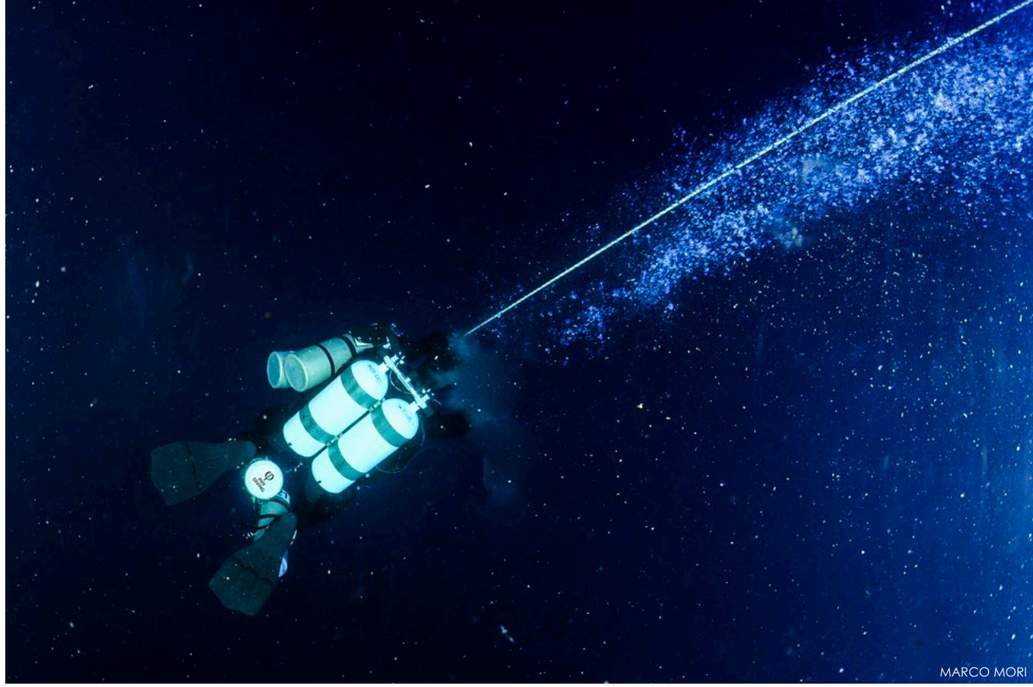
BAR MARIUS / TOULON

Diving on the UJ-*2208*

The team with which I was diving was already waiting for me at the water's surface, holding their BOVs (bailout valves) between their teeth. I could see their red and green LED sensors flashing. They were just waiting for me to give the OK signal to descend, because I was the only one diving on open circuit, so I needed to breathe calmly and deeply before departing from the surface. I eyed each one of them, giving each the OK signal, and we started to descend along the 98m downline that connected us to the top of the wreck.

Step by step, I checked the gas switches while my thumb and forefinger slid down the white rope. When I reached the wreck, I fastened a strobe light above us to help us easily find our way back home. Today, the visibility was very poor; it varied from two to three meters maximum. A couple of minutes later, the team was ready to start the exploration of the wreck.

Orienting ourselves to the wreck was complicated; we had scant information upon which to plan the dive. We only knew that the bow leaned to the right with the keel pointing up to the sun. A quick glimpse at the wreck told me that this was not the case. In fact, the hull was resting completely on its starboard side as if it was sleeping deeply. The main deck was perpendicular to the seabed—further complicating how to film the wreck and collect data.


MARCO MORI

Alpini descending on the downline to the wreck of the UJ-*2208* at 108m (right); Alpini looking inside the bow deck of the UJ-*2208* at 106m (below)

I proceeded along at an average depth of 105m. I could see some cracks and holes in the ancient wooden main deck. The view I had of the wreck told me that it was very fragile and complex. Sometimes, discerning elements of the site was difficult, and I needed to get very close to the wreck. At this stage, I preferred to focus on only a few elements and the overall shape of the wreck itself.

I descended a few meters lower. Now I was at 108m, the bottom. I inspected the steel beams covered in silt, then I turned back, retracing my steps, to again approach the extreme shape of the bow. There appeared a razor line that ran straight into the darkness of the sea. I swam four meters along the draught of the ship's hull. Big shadows and zero visibility made it seem like this short swim was eternal.

Mine explosion damage

Moving up the hull to the top, I passed under our strobe light, which flashed proudly in the dark. Below this point, the wreck was open like a can of tuna. The mine blast had created a chasm in the ship. Looking at it, one could recognize each section of the ship. You could see, layer by layer, all the architecture and engineering of UJ-*2208*.

The mighty beams were curled like a brushstroke. The heat of the explosion must have deformed the ship into a new and irregular shape. I spent some time evaluating its condition. I was at a depth of 99m when I decided to go inside the wreck. I moved forward slowly. A few minutes later, I reached the bow. I could see the ribs of what was once the fishing trawler *Alfred*—it was amazing. After a while, I looked out through a crack and saw the shining lights of my diving buddies. Against the light, the skeleton of UJ-*2208* appeared before me. Unfortunately, I could not fully savor the atmosphere to the end of the wreck because there was a constant silty fog that never lifted.

Details of the wreck

I exited the wreck at a depth of 106m and turned around to admire it from another point of view. Following the median line of the main deck, I noticed a hollow circular section that arose about 1.5m from the deck. I could not identify its function; I could only hypothesize that it might have served as a point of communication between crew members above and below deck. A short distance away, I saw two cargo winches.

Then, I poked my head and my dive lamp through a rectangular hole in the hull, and a new scene appeared before my eyes. Inside, visibility was clear and a new world of small stuff and details now filled my view. "This part of the wreck looks more like a fishing ship than a battleship," I thought to myself as I continued my exploration.

We had five minutes left to spend on the wreck, so I decided to move toward an element that had piqued my curiosity. After a quick look, I recognized a circular structure that was one meter high—a kind of parapet or bulkhead. Inspecting it further, I found other structures merged with it. The framework was about six meters high; it seemed to be an armed turret or lookout tower.

My depth gauge signaled that my bottom time was over and I had to ascend. I still had time to recover my strobe light before calculating decompression tables: 28 minutes at an average depth of 105m. A carpet of red shrimp covered the downline's surroundings. This was the last glimpse of the wreck's bow section I had.


MARCO MORI

At 99m, a tiny door entrance on the main deck's starboard side at UJ-2208's stern (left); At 98m, on the wreck's stern, a Flak 38 anti-aircraft gun is hidden by fishing nets (bottom right).

UJ-2208

Later, it would be only water and a long decompression time. After a while, the battleship UJ-*2208* disappeared into a wild and stormy cloud of muddy current.

Revisiting the wreck

A few weeks later, I was diving again on the wreck of UJ-*2208*. This time, I decided to focus only on the stern section of the German battleship. We were more than 160m away from the point we had dived the last time.

Approaching the wreck was really fascinating. The first glimpse we got was of the old anti-aircraft Flak 38, with its guns pointing upwards, in search of daylight. The top of the gun was at a depth of 90m. Unfortunately, a lost fishing net partially covered the machine gun. It looked like a bride at the altar waiting to be revealed.

The atmosphere around the wreck was satisfying. Once the strobe light and a couple of decompression cylinders had been secured to the downline, we began our exploration.

Crossing the stern from left to right, I rounded the circular shape of the structure that held the Flak 38. The steel structure had partially collapsed under its own weight and now lay flat on the transom. Looking through the tiny cracks of the wreck, one could catch glimpses of dancing crabs glued to the old ship's steel structure. Descending a few more meters, I followed the profile of the rudder until I reached the bulb of the left propeller.

Above my head, a labyrinth of fishing ropes and nets made the site look like a tropical forest of leaves, branches and vines.

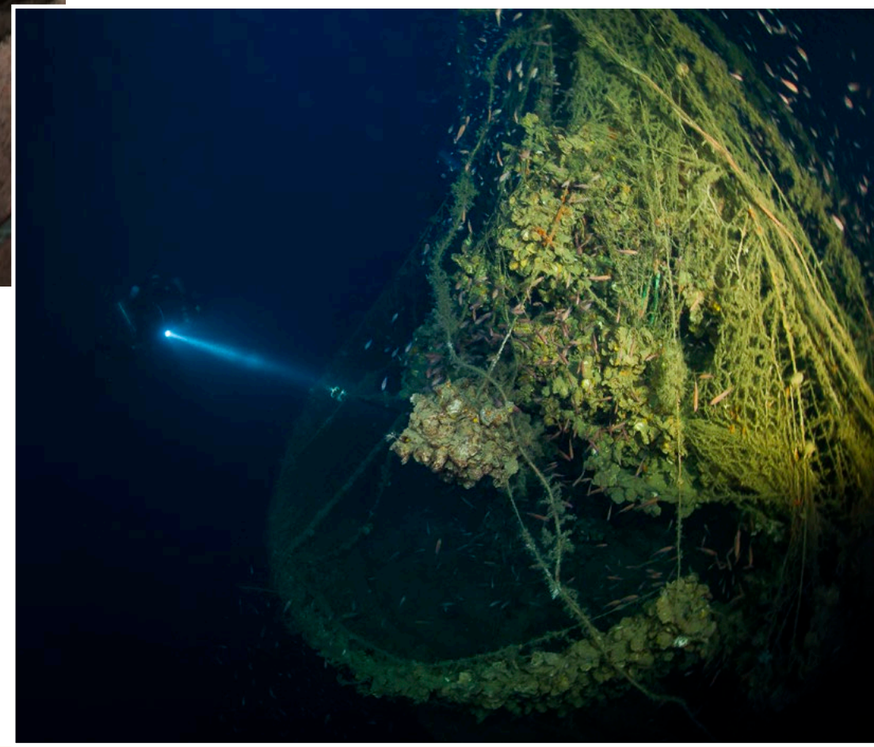
Surprisingly, the visibility on the bottom was great. The ship's funnel lay on its side next to the port side of the ship at a depth of 102m. A few fin kicks later, I reached the left edge of UJ-*2208*, which was wide and grand, and completely covered by oysters.

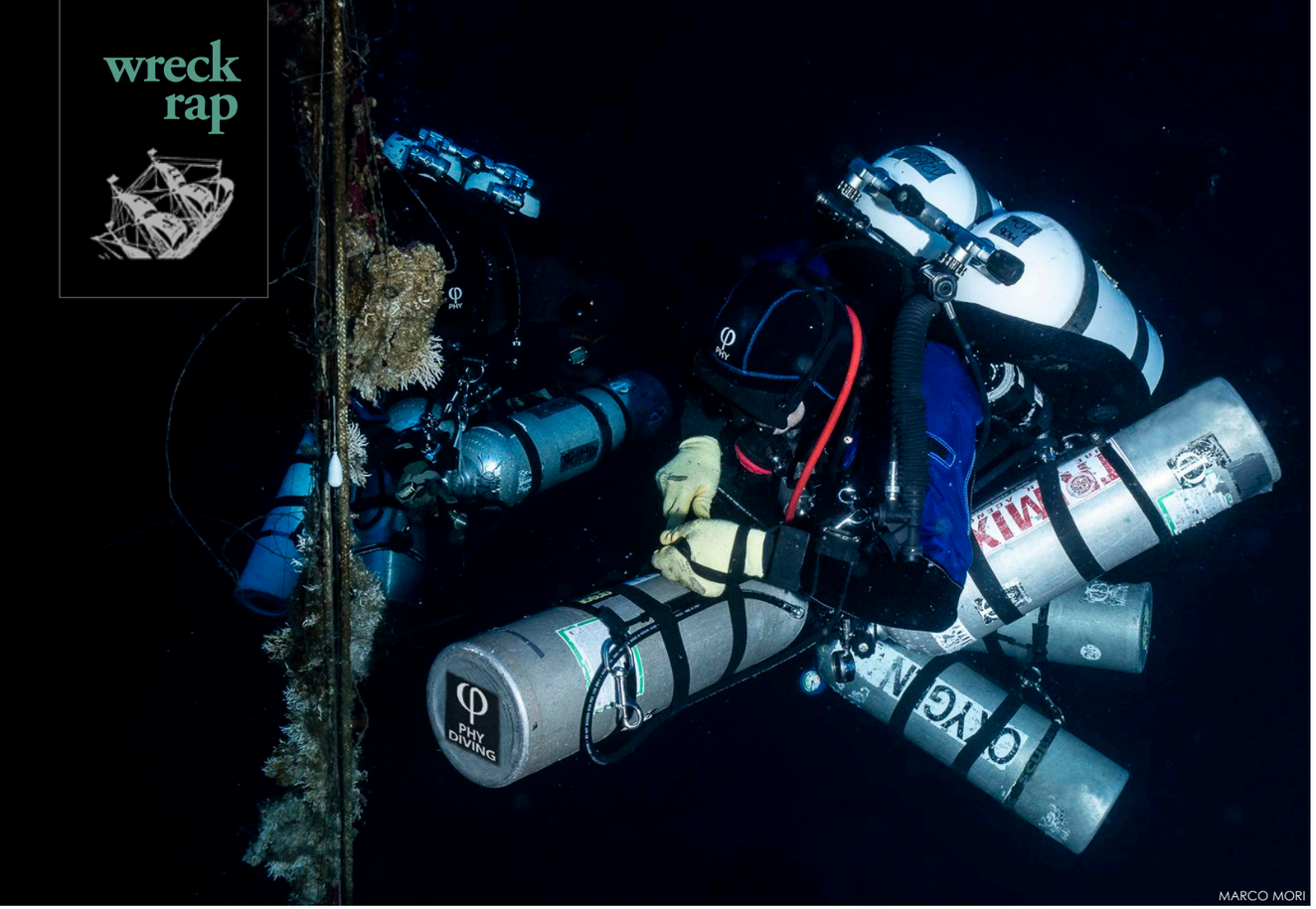
I turned back again to the main deck. Subjected to the force of the winter sea over decades, the wreck had collapsed in on itself. The main door through which one could get under the bridge was very narrow. It was necessary to remove our decompression cylinders or bailout to get inside this unexplored area. The central part of the ship was cut in two by the mine explosion. We were on the opposite facade from our last dive on the bow.

Challenging navigation

Our daily target was to reach the end of the main deck. I wanted to see what remained after the 1944 explosion. The mine had struck very hard. What we saw were just ruins—metal sheets bent out of shape. Getting lost in this rubble was easy. My buddy and I had begun each exploration at the same metal sheets on our left when our navigation suddenly brought us to the right. Memorizing elements on the wreck was very difficult; the path to the end of the wreck was twisted and curved. The sensation of disorientation continued to grow until my dive buddy finally asked me: "Where is the stern?"

We had entered a void, traversing a land inhabited by huge metal sheets and beams. With my right hand held firmly out in front of me, I put my video light down, checked the compass, and took the correct direction towards the bow. We had been at a depth of 99m for quite a long time. The wreck appeared very fragmented and unrecognizable, like teeth of steel rising from the seabed.





Alpini and Pinna switch gases during a decompression stop on the downline to UJ-2208.

While we swam back to the main deck of the wreck, I found a very interesting place where it was possible to get inside. Unfortunately, it was too far away from our downline and too late in our dive to investigate.

We moved forward quickly. Below me, I saw the destruction caused by the mine. A few fin kicks ahead, the handle of a machine gun appeared. Its position coincided with the archival photos I had studied during dive planning over recent weeks.

We were almost at the stern. Some meters ahead, I could clearly see our strobe light flashing. I now felt like I was home again. ■

The team's sponsors include PHY Diving Equipment, Scubatec, Tecnodive Booster, Big Blue Lights and TEMC Gas Analyzers.

Based in Italy, author Andrea "Murdock" Alpini is a technical diving instructor for TDI, CMAS and ADIP. Diving since 1997, he is a professional diver focused on advanced trimix deep diving, log dives with open circuit, decompression studies, and research on wrecks, mines and caves. Diving uncommon spots and arranging dive expeditions, he shoots footage of wrecks and writes presentations for conferences and articles for dive publications and websites such as ScubaPortal, Relitti in Liguria, Nautica Report, SUB Underwater Magazine, ScubaZone, Ocean4Future, In Depth *and* X-Ray Mag. *He is also a member of the Historical Diving Society Italy (HDSI), and holds a master's degree in architecture and an MBA in economics of arts. He is the founder of PHY Diving Equipment (**phidiving.com**), which specializes in undergarments for diving, as well as drysuits, hoods and tools for cave and wreck diving. Among other wrecks, he has dived the Scapa Flow wrecks heritage, Malin Head's wrecks and the HMHS* Britannic *(-118m), Fw58C (-110m), SS* Nina *(-115m),* Motonave Viminale *(-108m), SS* Marsala *(-105m), UJ-2208 (-108m) and the submarine U-455 (-119m)—always on an open circuit system. His first book,* Deep Blue, *about scuba diving exploration (in Italian) was released in January 2020 (see amazon.it). For more information on courses, expeditions and dived wrecks, please visit: **wreckdiving.it**.*

US NAVY

Historical photo of the USS *Johnston* off Seattle, Washington, USA, taken on 27 October 1943

USS Johnston, world's deepest known wreck, positvely identified

An expedition has successfully relocated, surveyed and filmed the USS *Johnston*, a WWII US Navy Fletcher-class destroyer that sank in battle on 25 October 1944. Lying at a depth of 21,180ft (6,456m), it is the world's deepest known shipwreck.

The 115m-long US Navy destroyer is widely known for her bold action in the Battle off Samar in the Philippines. The actions of the relatively lightly armed *Johnston*—sunk after a fierce battle with a large fleet of Japanese warships—helped stop the Japanese Admiral Kurita's Center Force from attacking vulnerable US landing forces, and inflicted greater losses to the Japanese attackers than they suffered.

Initial discovery

On 30 October 2019, it was announced that the research vessel *Petrel* of Vulcan Inc. discovered what was believed to be the deepest shipwreck ever, located at 20,406ft (6,220m) deep in the Philippine Trench; the wreck was in pieces with no significant hull sections located.

The wreckage pieces found consisted of two destroyed 5-inch (127mm) turrets, a propeller shaft and propeller, two funnels, a mast, a barbette, and unidentified piles of twisted hull, interior, or machinery debris.

On that expedition, film recordings of pieces of the vessel were taken by a remotely operated vehicle (ROV), but the majority of the wreck, including its upright, intact, forward two-thirds—the bow, bridge and midsection—lay deeper than the ROV's rated depth limit of approximately 20,000ft (6,000m).

Confirmation

On 31 March 2021, it was announced that the research vessel DSV *Limiting Factor* of Caladan Oceanic had surveyed and photographed the deeper main wreck. The hull number, 557, was clearly visible on both sides of its bow, confirming the wreck as *Johnston*. She sat upright and was astonishingly well-preserved at a depth of 21,180ft (6,460m), making this vessel the deepest shipwreck ever recorded.

Two full 5in gun turrets, twin torpedo racks, and multiple gun mounts were still in place and visible on the superstructure. No human remains or articles of clothing were seen at any point during the dives and nothing was taken from the wreck. ■

SOURCE: CALADAN OCEANIC

CALADAN OCEANIC

Photographs of the wreckage leave no doubt that it is the wreck of the USS *Johnston*.