



Expedition member Bjorn Sloodmaekers exploring the ventilation system of the *Graf Zeppelin* wreck

Text and photos by Vic Verlinden

There have been a few times during my life as a diver that I have had the opportunity to dive an extraordinary wreck. The *Graf Zeppelin* is one such wreck. It is more than a shipwreck, it is also one of the great mysteries of the Second World War. Most people do not know that the Germans built an aircraft carrier. Here is her story.

When the dictator of Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler, arrived at the shipyard in Kiel on 8 December 1938, he was accompanied by Field Marshal Hermann Göring and Grand Admiral Eric Raeder. Several hundred other invited guests as well as all the

employees of the shipyard and their families also attended this auspicious day. For on this day, the very first aircraft carrier in the history of the German navy was launched. Various film crews set

up their cameras just before the launch, so they could capture this historic moment on film.

The family crest of the Von Zeppelin family was mounted on the bow of this mighty ship.

After a few short speeches, the ship glided from the slipway while thousands of spectators cheered, wishing the ship godspeed.

The *Graf Zeppelin* rode high on the water, as a lot of the upper

superstructure and armaments had yet to be installed. In addition, the elevators, which were needed to bring the 42 planes from the hangar to the deck, were yet to be installed. The

60mm steel deck was also yet to be covered with wooden planking.

While the work progressed to complete the aircraft carrier, the situation in Europe became



The Graf Zeppelin

— *Diving Hitler's Aircraft Carrier*



Rebreather divers swimming over the deck of the Graf Zeppelin



Graf Zeppelin

worse. However, upon the start of World War II in September 1939, the ship was still not yet finished.

Because the building of U-boats had priority over the completion of the Graf Zeppelin, the ship was laid up in the port of Gdynia, Poland. Here, the vessel was out of reach of the bombers of the British Royal Air Force. However, on August 27, the British air force did attempt an attack, with 12 Lancaster bombers to destroy the ship. Due to bad weather, the attempt failed.

In the following years, the ship was used as a depot for military materials. And finally on 27 April 1945, the vessel was to be sunk with the use of explosive charges to prevent the ship falling into the hands of the approaching Russian troops.

A second life

When the Russians found the Graf Zeppelin upon their arrival, the vessel was not completely submerged and was presumed intact. After a brief inspection, the damage became apparent and repairs to raise the ship were started immediately. In September 1945, it was reported the ship was floating again near Stettin.

However, due to the start of the Cold War, little news about the ship came out. Some sources reported she was serving in the Soviet navy. Others presumed

she had been sunk by a mine whilst loaded with looted artefacts and other spoils of war.

The truth finally surfaced in July 2006, when a Polish oil company was researching the seabed of the Baltic Sea, about 40 miles north of the port of Wladyslawowo. A short while later, the Polish navy investigated with a submersible robot and confirmed the finding of the Graf Zeppelin. It is still not known what the cargo of the ship was.

Organizing a dive expedition

I planned to dive this unique wreck as early as 2012. I contacted my good friend Sebastian Popek from Poland. He chartered a ship, which could cover the distance to the

wreck, and he also gathered a group of technical divers who could make such a dive. Two weekends were proposed, so we would have a reasonable chance of sailing to the wreck. It was necessary to have stable weather to do the technical dives. Shortly before my departure, I received a message that the weather in the Baltic was not good, and we would try again the next week. But the next week, the weather was still too bad for diving, and our trip to Poland was cancelled.

In 2014, a new opportunity to dive the wreck presented itself. My colleague, Robert Grzesecki, left me message on Facebook about bringing together a group to go to the wreck. As one of the divers had to cancel,



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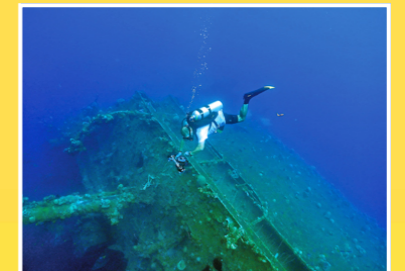
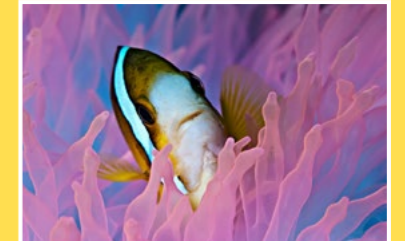
Historical photo of the Graf Zeppelin, launched in 1938



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THIS PAGE: Expedition members prepare for the dive

a spot had opened which I could take. The date of the trip was set for July 12-19. During this period, we had the best chance of good weather in this region.

A journey of obstacles

One of other Belgian divers who joined this expedition made it easier for me to get to the departure point by offering a lift to Poland, and so we drove there together. Bjorn Sloodmaekers, who would also be diving on a rebreather, would be my buddy for the dives to the Graf Zeppelin. The Italian diver, Aldo Ferucci, with

whom I had done several expeditions would also be joining our team. The other participants were English and German divers.

Expedition leader, Robert Grzesecki, prepared dive plans for the whole week. The plan was to dive some known and some unknown wrecks. However, the planned dive to the wreck of the Franken was cancelled due to a recent accident in which two Polish divers had perished.

On the first day of the expedition, we made a test dive in the harbor of Hel. During this dive, we had the opportunity to check our rebreathers one



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final time and adjust the amount of dive weights we used.

From the next day on, however, there was a lot of wind and fairly high waves. Therefore, we decided to stay close to the shore, as this provided calmer waters. However, the visibility was limited to 1.5 meters, rendering underwater photography impossible.

Finally on Wednesday, we were able to moor the dive boat further out to sea, at an unknown wreck site which we had planned to dive. The wreck lay at a depth of 65m and was only dived upon once last year. When I started the descent, the visibility was limited to 4m, but beyond the thermocline at 15m, the water became clear and much colder. The wreck itself was heavily damaged and overgrown with small shellfish. Everywhere I looked, I saw heavy fishing nets, which covered the wreck, creating dangerous obsta-

cles for the unwary diver.

Unfortunately, when I wanted to use my camera, the flash would not respond, and the battery appeared to be empty. Most likely, I had left the pilot light on dur-

ing the last dive.

At first sight, the wreck did not reveal many recognizable parts. It was only in the last moments of our dive that we encountered a piece of the wreck standing straight up,



Debris inside the wreck; The airplane elevator resting upside down (top)

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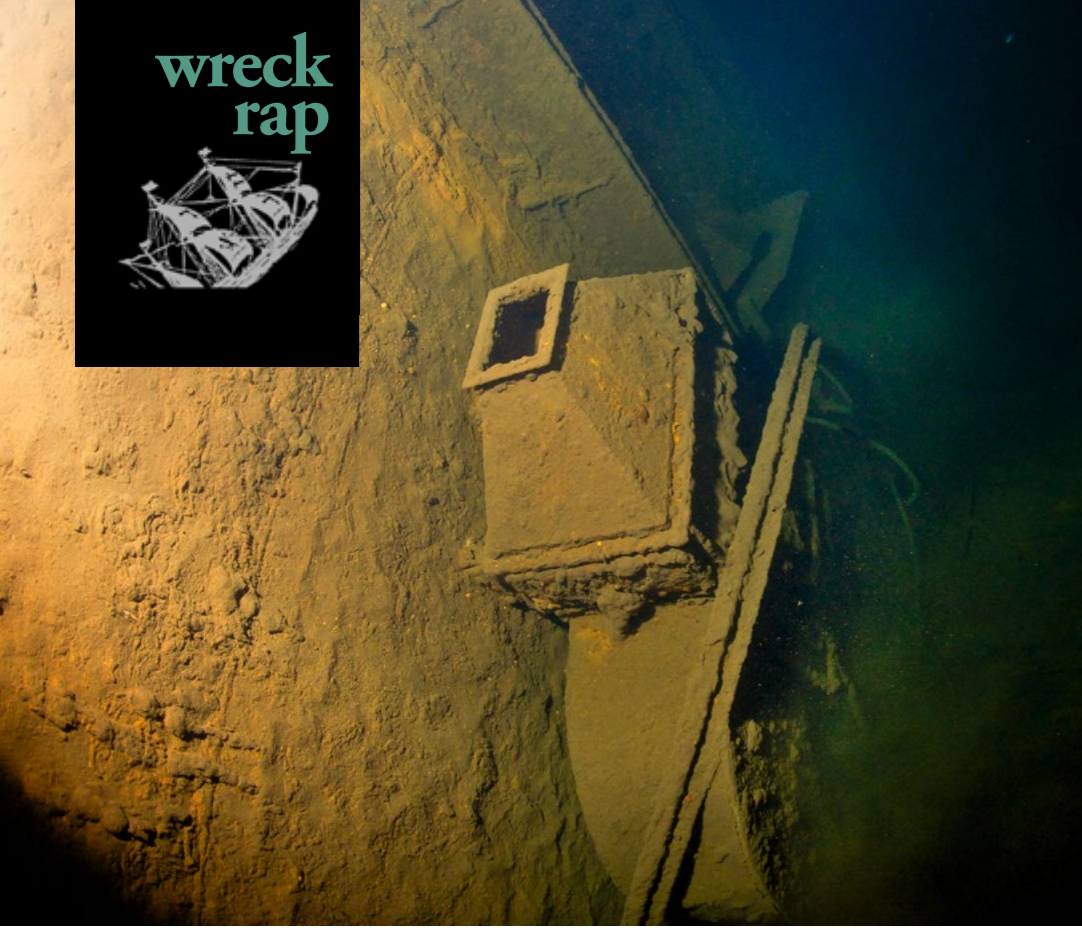


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Divers on the wreck of the *Graf Zeppelin* (right) and views of the ventilation system inside the airplane garage (left) and the wall of the airplane garage (below)

depth between 70 and 90m. The water temperature was only 4°C at this depth. During the descent, we passed through another thermocline with bad visibility, but below 20m, the water became clear. At a depth of 50m, I could already see the shadow of the wreck, and at 70m, I landed on the deck.

First, I prepared my camera and decided to swim along the deck where a large hole was visible. I could clearly see the chain and its sprocket that was used to move the elevators up and down. A little further on, a part of the ventilation system mounted in the elevator shaft was visible.

We now found ourselves at a depth of 75m and had to constantly look up so as not to swim



about 10m in height. Here, there were also lots of nets present, and we had to be very careful not to get caught in them. After completing our ascent, we were picked up by the dive boat via a lift on the boat. Robert told us that he found the steering wheel and telegraph on the higher parts of the wreck. Unfortunately, we had ended our dive at that point and missed these finds.

Finally, the Graf Zeppelin!

Thursday brought too much wind to dive, but we decided to spend the night at sea anyway, as Friday promised to bring a window of calm weather. If we departed early enough for the wreck site, we would indeed be able to dive the Graf Zeppelin.

In the morning, the waves were about two meters high, but we still had to sail for three hours to the location of the wreck. However, the wind died completely upon our arrival at the wreck's location.

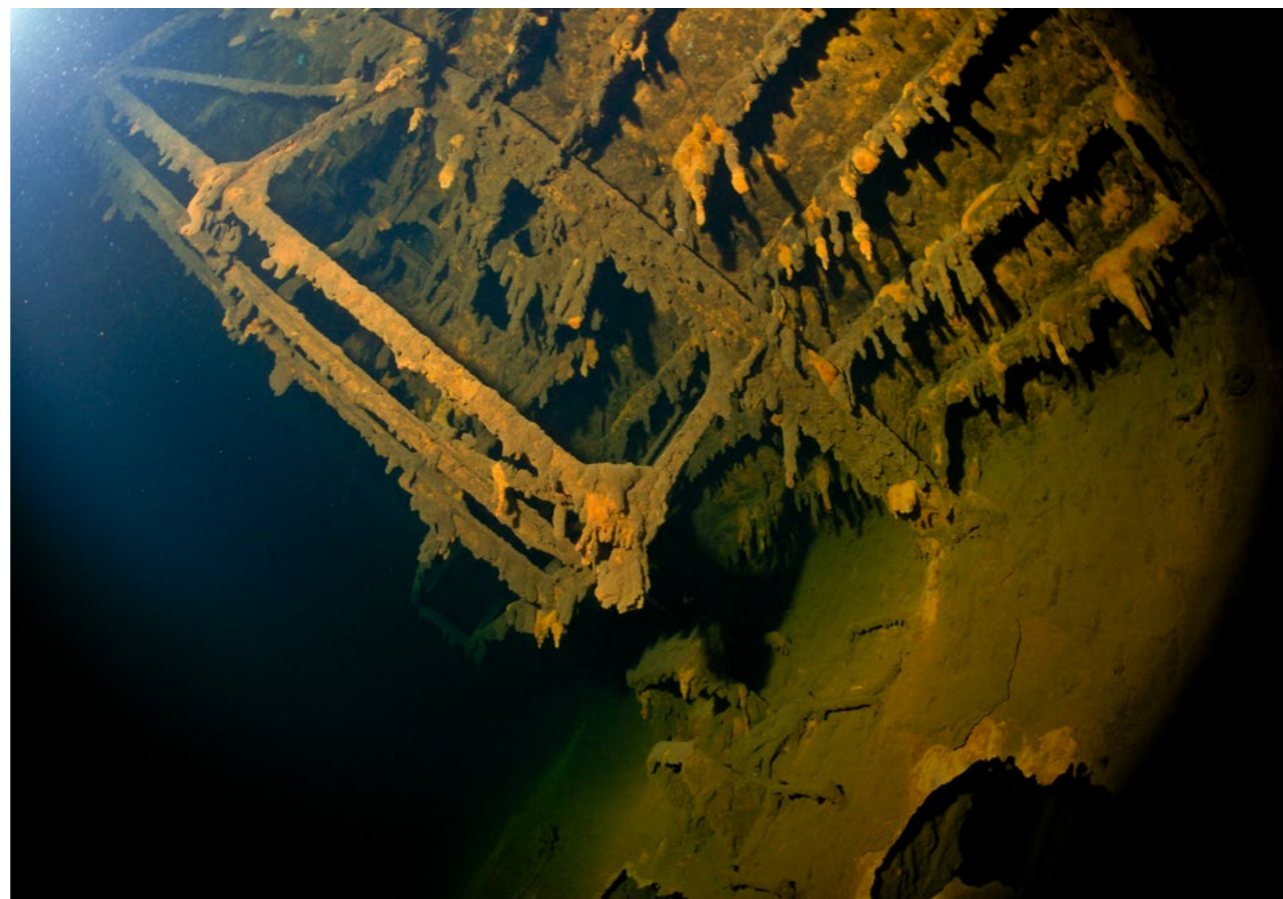
After a short briefing, expedi-

tion leaders Robert and Natty prepared themselves to make the first dive. The agreement was to wait for their report before a second team would enter the water.

When they completed their decompression stops, they came back with bad news: A large fishing net was caught on the down line. It stretched 45m up from the wreck, supported by floaters. It would be too dangerous to send all the expedition teams down at this location, so we decided to reposition the down line at a different spot on the wreck.

When the repositioning was completed, I would be able to go down to the wreck with the third team. This team included Bjorn Sloodmaekers, Aldo Ferucci, Marcello Bussotti and myself.

The wreck lay on a



into an enclosed space. I could now see one of the elevator platforms lying upside down in the elevator shaft. The water was freezing at this depth, and my hands slowly started to cramp up, which led me to decide to swim back to the down line.

On the deck, we encountered another team that just completed their descent. For us, the 20 minutes of bottom time was up, and we had to start a long period of decompression time.

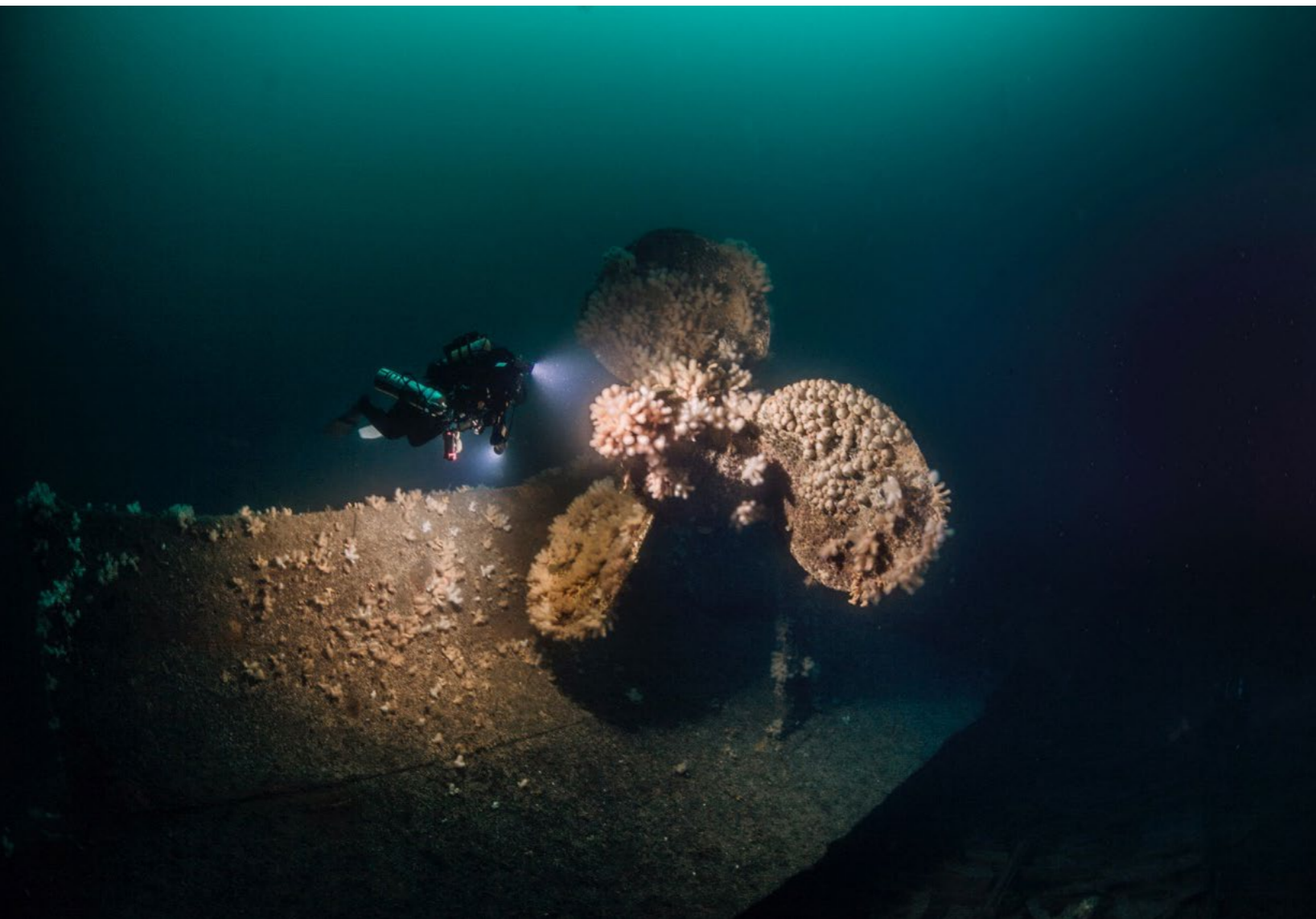
After the dive, everybody agreed that this was a beautiful dive

and certainly worth all the troubles. After three years of waiting, I had finally made a dive on this magical wreck. It was a shame that the wind picked up again, making a second dive impossible, but I can't wait to make more dives on this giant with a secret past. ■

Having dived over 400 wrecks, Vic Verlinden is an avid, pioneering wreck diver, award-winning underwater photographer and dive guide from Belgium. His work has been published in dive magazines and technical diving publications in the United States, Russia, France, Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom and the Netherlands. He is the organizer of tekDive-Europe technical dive show. See: tekdiver-europe.com.

WWI cruiser HMS Hampshire surveyed

Underwater photos courtesy of Rod McDonald



The port propeller of HMS Hampshire



The upturned bow of HMS Hampshire in 68m of water

The ship carrying Lord Kitchener, Britain's Secretary of State for War, and his staff to Russia to discuss mutual war aims and strategy is rumoured to have been carrying a fortune in gold bullion.

The 10,850-ton armoured cruiser HMS *Hampshire* departed Scapa Flow in Orkney on 5 June 1916 on a voyage around the north cape of Norway to the port of Archangel in northern Russia. As she struggled up the west coast of Orkney in a severe gale, approximately one and a half miles off Marwick Head, she struck a mine laid by the German Submarine U-75 a week before on 29 May—and quickly sank. Of the 749 people aboard, only 12 managed to reach the shore alive. Lord Kitchener who famously featured on the “Your country needs you!” recruitment

posters, and his staff were lost. He was being transported to Russia at the time for a secret meeting with Tsar Nicholas II.

HMS *Hampshire* played a minimal role in the Battle of Jutland, between May 31 and June 1, before being reassigned as Lord Kitchener's personal transport. Today, HMS *Hampshire* lies at a depth of approximately 70m (230ft) near the northwest tip of Orkney in an exposed area open to North Atlantic storms and strong tidal flows. The location makes diving HMS *Hampshire* a challenging undertaking.

Expedition leader Rod Mac-

donald, a shipwreck explorer and internationally renowned diving author explained:

“The story of HMS *Hampshire* is of historical importance and her loss forms an important element of the WWI naval story. The expedition objective is to undertake a detailed survey of the shipwreck, to record it using stills and video photography using the latest underwater photogrammetry techniques.”

Mine damage

University of the Highlands and Islands Archaeology Institute reported the expedition uncovered

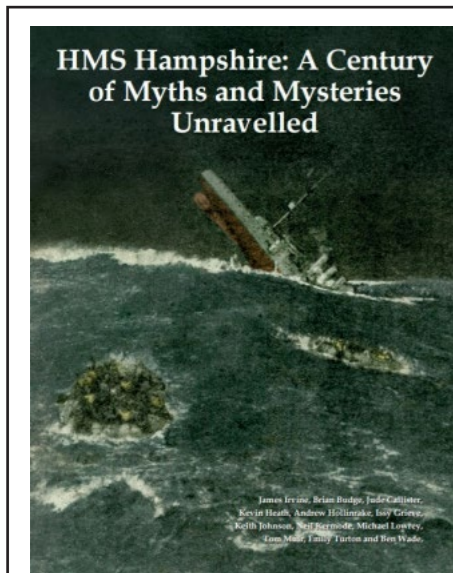


HMS *Hampshire*, here seen on a photo dated 1903, went down off Marwick Head in Orkney after striking a mine laid by a German submarine on June 5, 1916—with the loss of 737 lives. Among those lost was Lord Kitchener, the secretary of state for war, who was being transported to Russia for a secret meeting with Tsar Nicholas II.

new information and data concerning the wreck and provided insights into the mine damage at the bow of the vessel, the impact of salvage efforts, and the natural deterioration caused by the sea.

The Roving Eye Enterprises ROV survey confirmed previous findings that HMS *Hampshire* capsized as she sank and lies with an upturned hull on the seabed in approximately 60m (200ft) of water. The superstructure itself is compressed and is buried in the soft silt of the seabed. The

hull is damaged in places throughout the length of the vessel, exposing various elements of the interior, including torpedo tubes and machinery. Guns from the ship's secondary armament were also identified on the surrounding seabed at a distance of up to 30m (100ft) from the main body of the wreck. The location of these breech loading 6-inch MK VII guns may be related to the sinking event or salvage activity on the wreck. ■



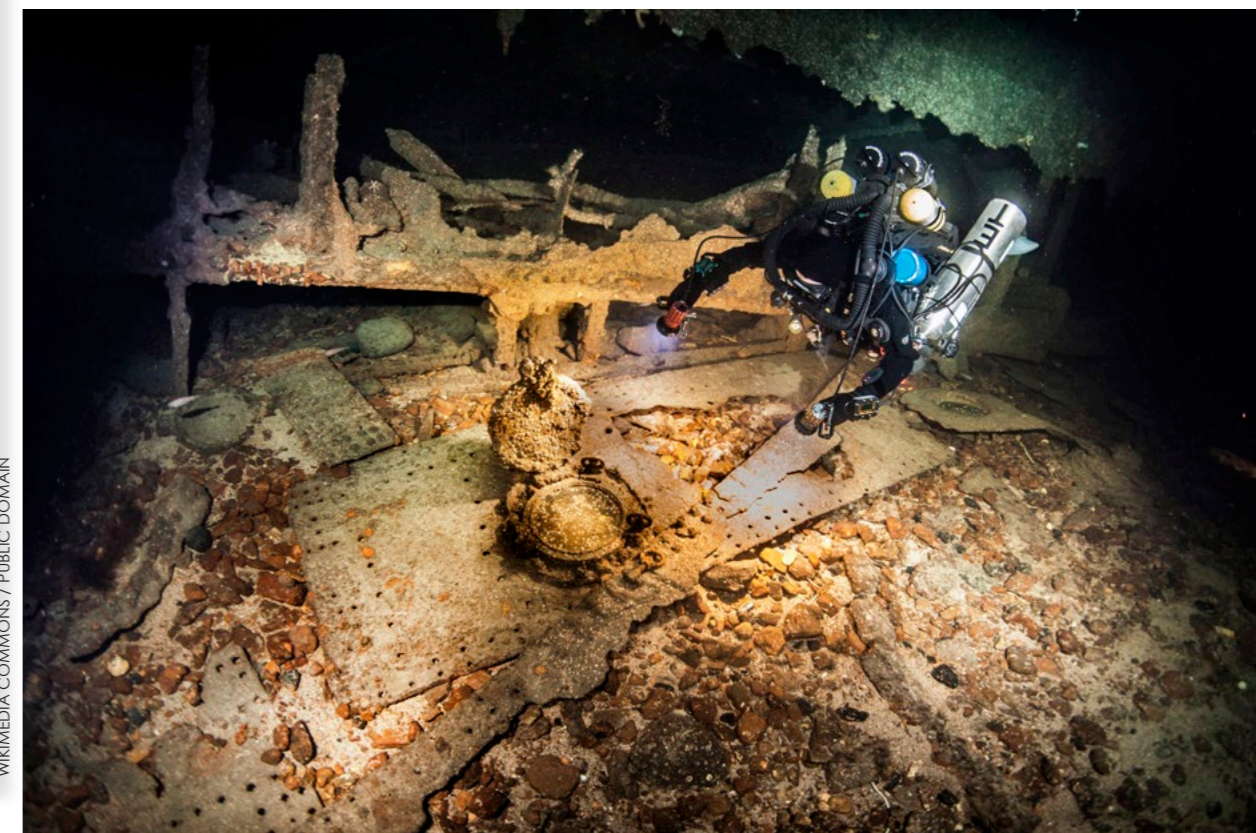
Book

Orkney Heritage Society announces the forthcoming publication of a book to commemorate the centenary of the loss of HMS *Hampshire* entitled, *HMS Hampshire: A Century of Myths and Mysteries Unravalled*.

The book assembles hitherto unused contemporary evidence to explore the causes and circumstances of the loss of HMS *Hampshire* on 5 June 1916 and the associated myths and mysteries. This A4, 120-page, illustrated case-bound book will be launched on 30 August 2016 and retail at GB£25 plus postage and packing. All proceeds, including authors' royalties, will go to the Orkney Heritage Society for the Kitchener Memorial refurbishment project. **More info >>>**



"Lord Kitchener Wants You" was a 1914 recruitment poster that continues to be considered a masterful piece of wartime propaganda as well as an enduring and iconic image of the war.



Emily Turton inspects a port side porthole of HMS *Hampshire* with its deadlight open (above); The port anchor of HMS *Hampshire* is still in its hawse pipe (top right).

