



wreck
rap

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In the Bay of Vlora (Valona), Albania, resting at a depth of 35m, lies one of the largest and most impressive wrecks in the whole Adriatic, that of the Italian hospital ship *Po*, sunk by British torpedo bombers on 14 March 1941. In the darkness of the night, the attacking pilots were not aware that the ship was a hospital ship. In the attack that ensued, 21 on board the ship died, including three nurses; one of whom was Mussolini's daughter, Edda Ciano, who was working for the Red Cross.

The background

I am on the coast of the Bay of Valona, together with Massimiliano Canossa, Michele Favaron, Edoardo Pavia, Mauro Pazzi and Igli Pustina for the third IANTD

Expedition in Albanian waters. The window of our hotel room overlooks the nearby beach; and as my gaze wanders across the bay, I cannot help but imagine the historical hospital ship *Po* sitting

out there so many years ago. "The Countess shipwrecked right on this beach," an Albanian friend tells me. "Italian soldiers arrived, they got her into a truck and took her away." The countess was Edda

Ciano Mussolini, the daughter of the Italian dictator who was travelling on the hospital ship *Po* as a Red Cross nurse. The *Po* was one of the 22 white ships used to repatriate sick, shipwrecked

and wounded during the Second World War.

The *Po* arrived in the bay of Valona on the evening of 14 March 1941 and moored about a mile from the mouth of the River Sec-

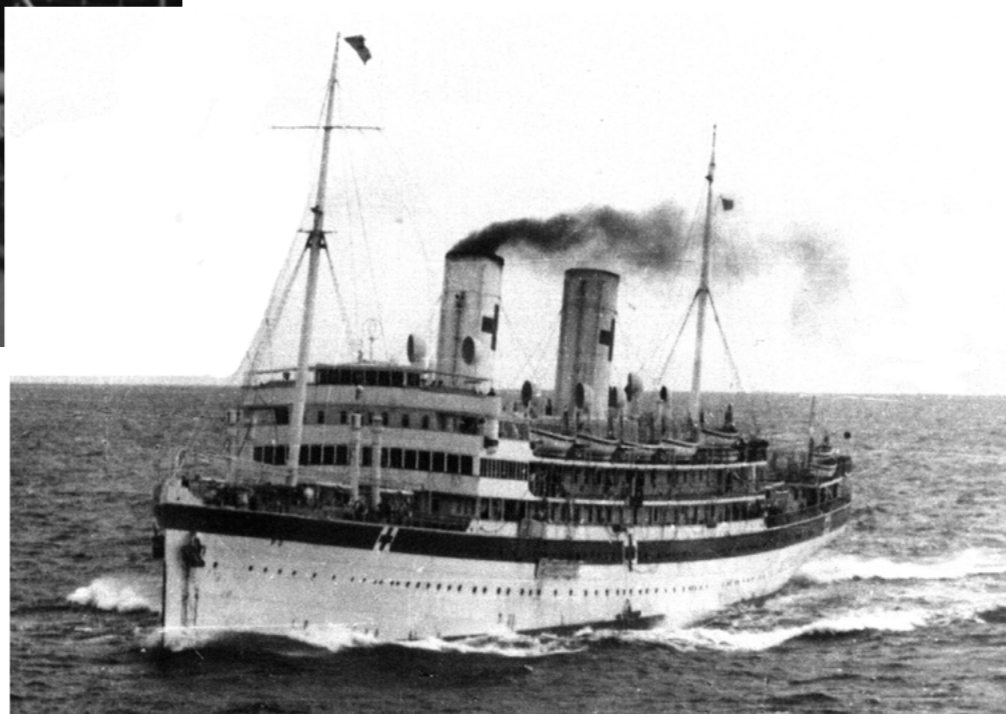
co, quite close to the coast. Thus, it would be possible the following day to transfer the wounded on board to ambulances and trucks from the barracks of military hospital no. 403, which was located on



The Italian Hospital Ship *Po*

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Historical photos of *Po* (top and left), which served as a hospital ship in WWI and WWII; Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers (top center) with HMS *Ark Royal* (far left) circa 1939

the hill behind us. By order of the Command of Marina di Valona, the hospital ship was not illuminated by light during the night, as the lights would have made it possible for British reconnaissance planes to identify the other ships moored in the bay.

Shortly after 11 o'clock that evening, five British torpedo airplanes from a base on the Greek island of Paramythia made it across the Karaburuni Peninsula mountain range on the other side of the bay of Valona without being intercepted.

As it reached the sea, a torpedo was unleashed from a Swordfish torpedo bomber under the command of Lieutenant Michael Torrens-Spence. It hit the hospital ship on the starboard side. In the matter of a few minutes, the *Po* began to tilt, so the order was given to abandon ship and launch the lifeboats.

During the ensuing turmoil, a lifeboat capsized, drowning two Red Cross nurses while a third lost her life trying to save them. Ten minutes after the torpedo struck, the ship sank, leaving only the main mast, which for years indicated the exact point of sinking, above water.

Wien, Vienna, Po.

The ship was launched on 4 March 1911 by the Lloyd Austrian shipyard in Trieste, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and named *Wien* (Vienna) for the Austrian capital. Like her sister ship, the *Helouan*, the *Wien* was a luxurious and fast steamer of 7,289 gross tons, 135m long and 16m wide. It was used for passenger transport on the route from Trieste to Alexandria in Egypt. It had cabins for 185 first-class passengers, 61 in second class and 54 in third class. The engine system consisted

of eight boilers and two engines which could propel the vessel at the decent speed of 17 knots.

World War I

On 16 February 1916, after the outbreak of the First World War, it was requisitioned by the Kaiserliche und Königliche Kriegsmarine, the Hapsburg Navy, and transformed into a hospital ship. In this capacity, it was used for a few months until, on 29 June 1916, she ran aground and damaged her propellers, after which she was returned to her owners, the Austrian Lloyd for repairs.

On 7 December 1917, she was requisitioned once more and

based at Pula at the tip of the Istrian Peninsula, where she was used as a barracks ship for the U-boat crews of the Kaiserliche Marine base in the Istrian port.

On the night between 31 October and 1 November 1918, the *Wien*, moored inside the port of Pula, became the target in an assault by the Italian Royal Navy.

Two special forces officers, Raffaele Rossetti and Raffaele Paolucci, using an underwater vehicle called *mignatta*, which was akin to riding a torpedo, managed to make their way past the barriers and obstructions protecting the port and used limpet mines to sink the SMS *Viribus*

Unitis, an Austro-Hungarian dreadnought battleship, of the Tegetthoff class.

After placing mines on the battleship, Rossetti was discovered and captured. He informed his captors that the ship was about to sink but was not believed as he

did not reveal that he had placed mines on the hull.

When the mines exploded, the *Viribus Unitis* capsized and sank with heavy loss of life. After placing the charges, the manned torpedo was scuttled, activating its self-destruction mechanism.



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Before exploding, the manned torpedo had come to rest near the *Wien*, and its explosion caused the steamer to sink.

Refloated and repaired in 1919, the steamer was returned to her former owner who, since Trieste had become part of Italy following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had changed its name to (Società anonima di Navigazione) *Lloyd Triestino*. It was registered under the Naples Maritime Compartment, with the Italianised name of *Vienna*, and returned to its previous functions as a steamer in 1921, on the Trieste - Venice - Brindisi - Alexandria route to Egypt.

Colonial war and WWII

Then, in 1935, with the outbreak of war in Ethiopia, it was first chartered and then requisitioned by the Italian Navy for the transport of the wounded and sick, but

classified not as a hospital ship but as some sort of intermediary infirmary ship. The Italian government wanted to take full advantage of every single journey from Naples to Massawa, Ethiopia, by having it carry the soldiers and ammunition on the outward journey and embarking the wounded and sick on the return journey. Hospital ships, which were afforded protection and had to be painted white with green bands and red crosses, could not be used to carry healthy troops and supplies.

After the colonial war, it was returned to Lloyd Triestino, renamed *Po* and returned to civil service. The last years of peace passed until following Italy's entry into the Second World War on 21 November 1940, it was again requisitioned by the Italian Royal Navy, which this time designated it as a hospital ship. It was painted according to the guidelines es-

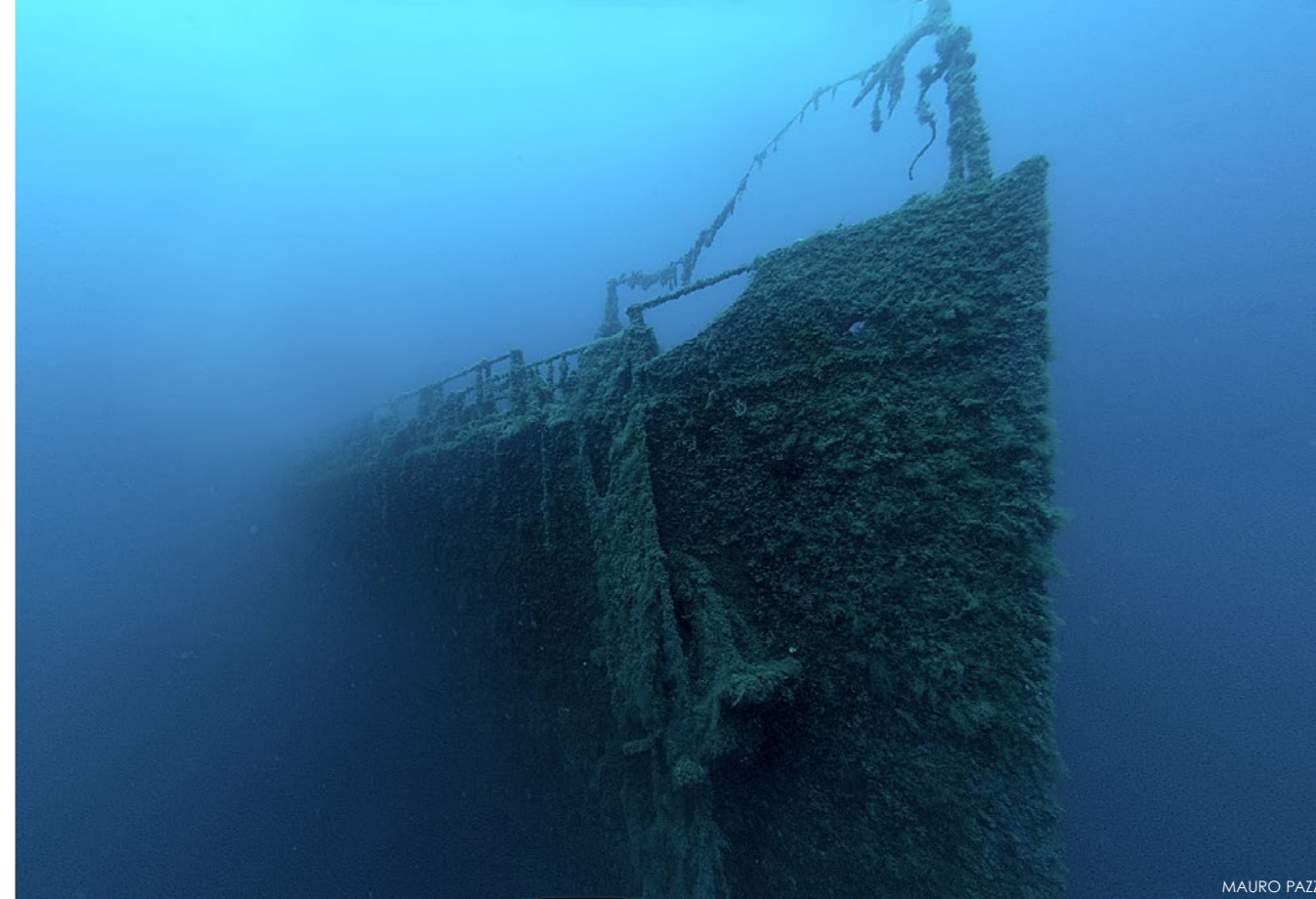
tablished by the Geneva Convention: white hull and superstructure, green belt interrupted by red crosses on the sides and the funnels.

After working on the Libyan front, from Tripoli and Benghazi, to repatriate the wounded of the North African campaign, in February 1941, she was sent to the Lower Adriatic to provide assistance to the wounded from the Greek-Albanian front.

The sinking

The legendary British 815th squadron flying Swordfish biplane torpedo bombers were transferred from the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious* to the airfield on the Greek island of Paramythia near the Albanian border on 12 March 1941. Their orders were to carry out raids on the ports of Valona and Durazzo, and the Italian military bases of Berat and Tirana.

THIS PAGE:
Interior and exterior views of the wreck of the Italian hospital ship *Po*, Valona Bay, Albania

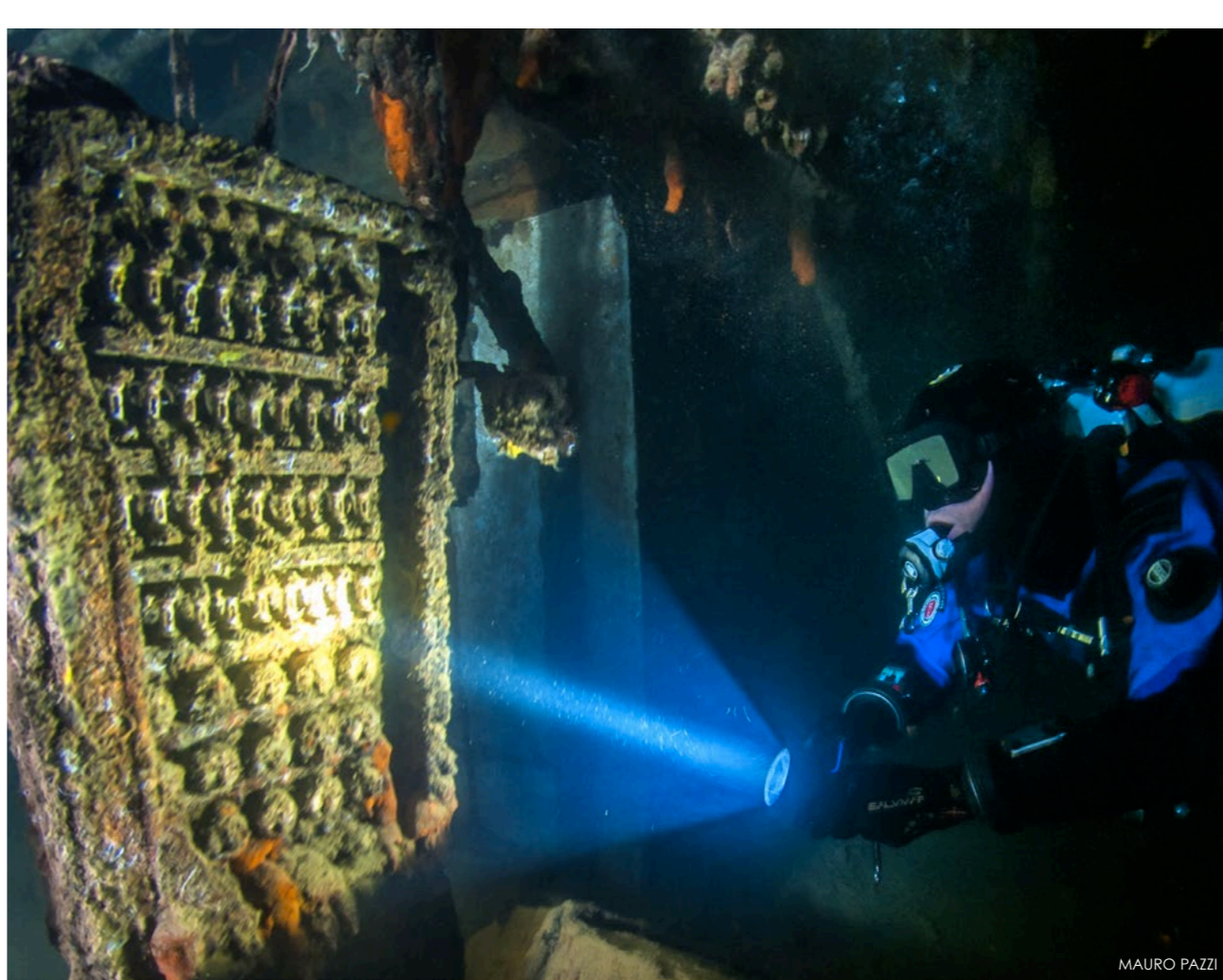


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THIS PAGE: Divers explore the interior of the Italian hospital ship *Po*

At 9:15 p.m. on 14 March, the *Swordfish* were each armed with a 730kg torpedo. They passed, at 10,000ft of altitude, the mountain chain south of the bay of Vlora and reached the sea, thus seeing the Italian navy and merchant fleet vessels at anchor in the harbour.

Painted in white, with green bands on the sides and large crosses on the funnels, always illuminated and recognisable during the night, the *Po* hospital ship enjoyed the protection of the norms of humanitarian law. The international agreements—the Hague Convention 1906 and Geneva 1907—fore-saw that in order to guarantee the nighttime safety of hospital ships, these should be completely illuminated.

A ship illuminated in the darkness could, however, also serve as a beacon for enemy aircraft. If the *Po* had been lit up that night, the

nearby ships, which were legitimate targets, would have been made visible too. Therefore, the Marine Command gave orders to obscure it, making it indistinguishable from normal transport vessels.

Sitting target

On 14 March 1941, the night was clear and moonlit. Descending to the altitude of 5,000ft after passing the mountains of the Karaburun Peninsula, Lieutenant Michael Torrens-Spence, as he would describe later in his report, managed to identify a quite visible but unilluminated target and launched a torpedo.

At 11:15 p.m., the *Po* was hit by the torpedo on the starboard side, and following the explosion, a large hole opened that caused the ship to sink so quickly that it prompted the commander to immediately give the order to abandon ship.



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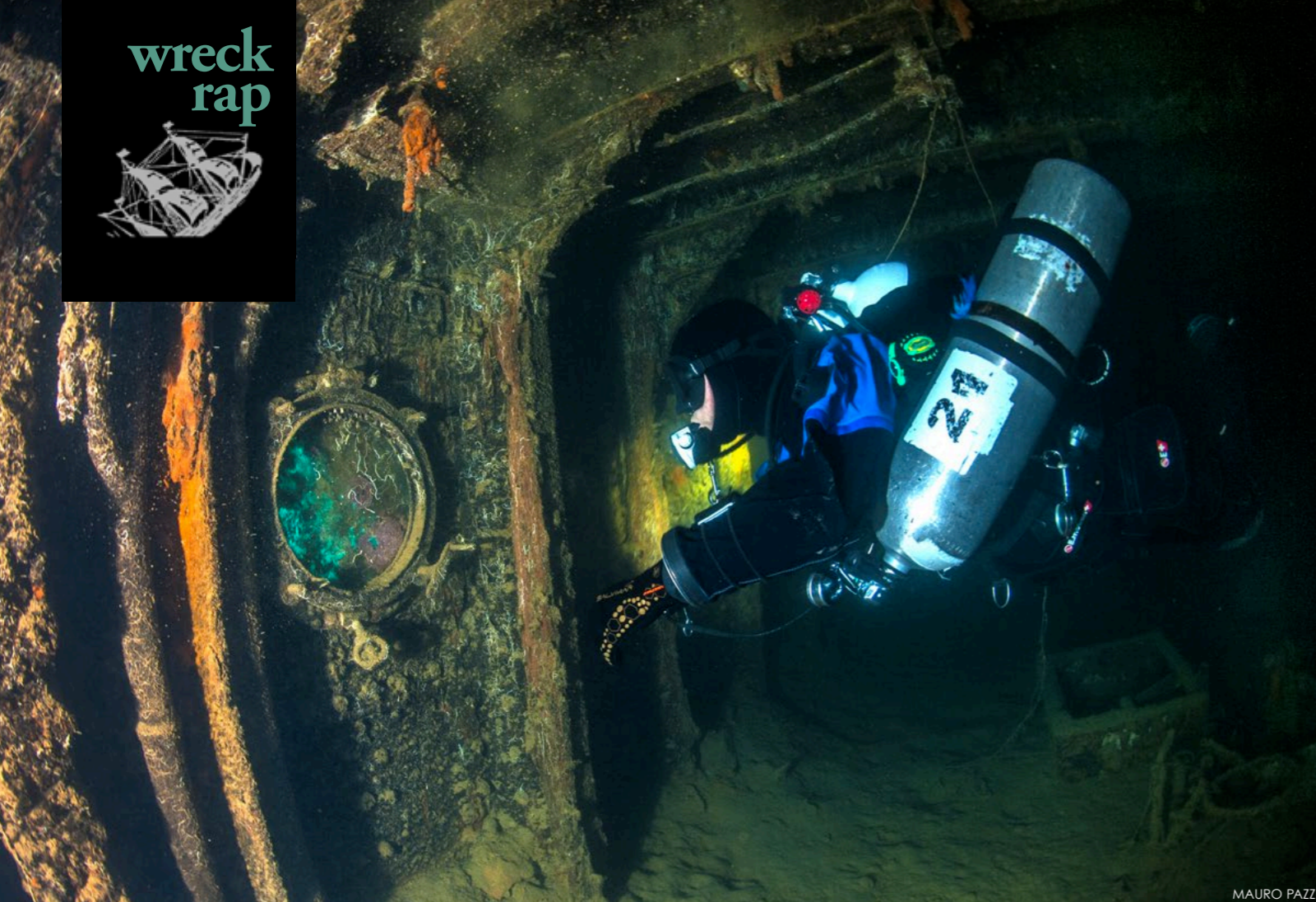


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Just two minutes after the torpedo hit, the sea water began to enter the stern, and four sailors were trapped in the now submerged compartment.

Of the 240 people on board, 20 crew members lost their lives, as well as four Red Cross nurses—Wanda Secchi, Emma Tramontani and Maria Federici—during the shipwreck; and a few months later, Maria Medaglia, from blood poisoning, for ingesting contaminated water.

The then 30-year-old Red Cross nurse, Edda, the eldest child of Benito Mussolini, was saved by reaching the beach of Radhima on a makeshift craft. The *Po*'s keel settled on a depth of about 35m. The steamer was so imposing that the top of the mast stuck out of the water by over a meter, thus indicating exactly the point of the shipwreck. Since then, the

wreck has remained in the bay of Valona, less than a mile from the Albanian coast.

The dive

Once in contact with the wreck, we noticed that visibility was good and there was a total absence of current. In the beginning, it was easy to be overwhelmed by the desire to want to visit everything, finding yourself in the end, swimming in a frantic way, between the decks, but the experience gained in previous dives and timely planning made us proceed with utmost caution. The first image we glimpsed was an evocative one of the bow, which immediately highlighted the vertical seams of the ship.

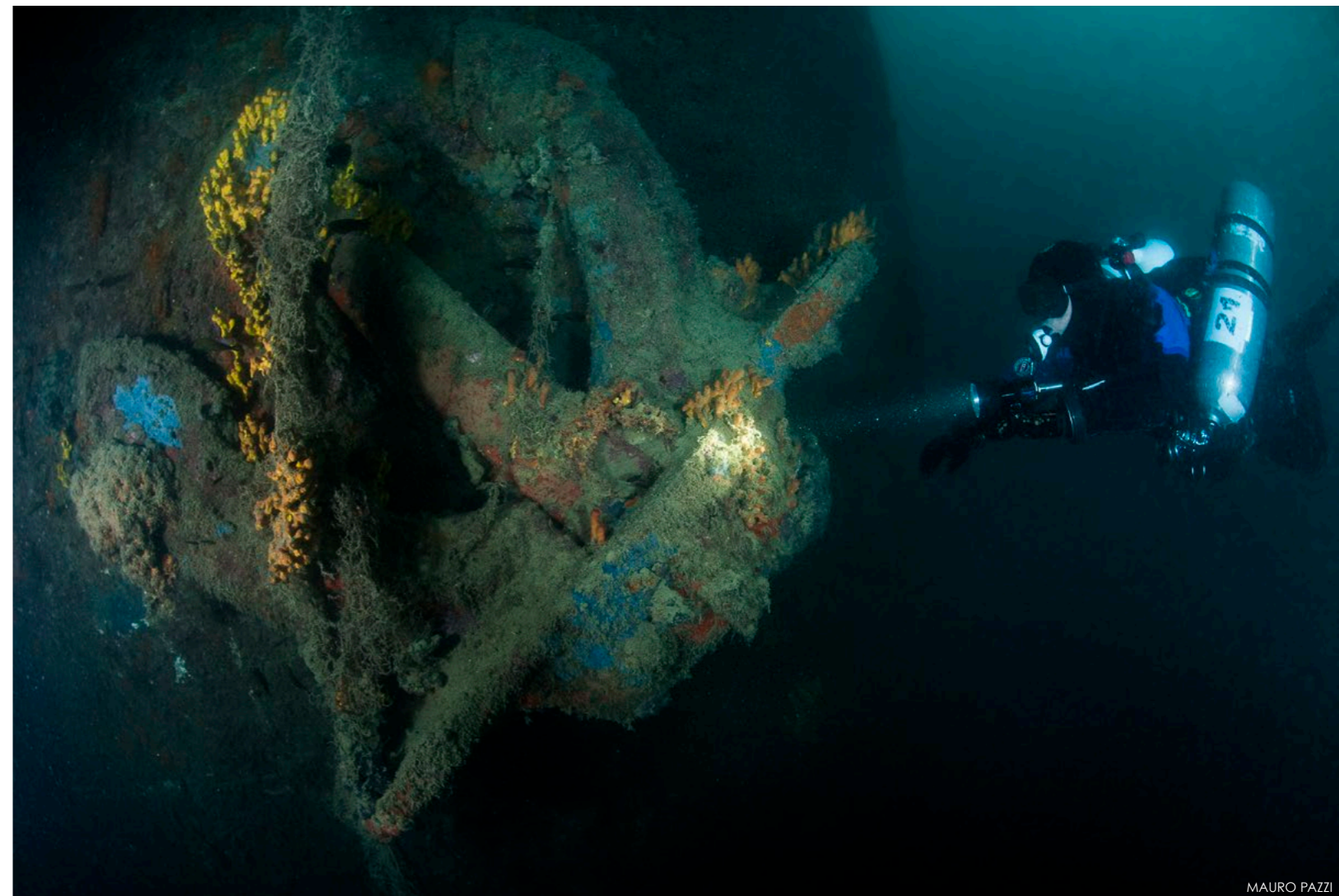
From the ship's left-hand-side hawse pipe, the anchor chain emerged, which on that fateful night of 14 March 1941 kept

the ship stationary at anchor. On the starboard side, Maximilian, lingered near the anchor, which still sat in its hawse pipe, on the side of the bow. Leaving the end of the prow, our dive proceeded towards the stern. What immediately caught the eye was the excellent state of preservation of the bridge deck, whose wooden tables in marine teak were still intact, clean and perfectly aligned with each other.

After passing a group of bow winches, we passed the mast, now lying on the deck after years of rising up to more than a metre above the surface of the sea. Today, the mass of beams and cables were lying horizontally on the main deck, across the openings of the two bow holds. Inside the first one, in a boatswain's cubicle, we found large quantities of tools for mooring the ship. In the



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THIS PAGE: Dive team members of the expedition shed light on artifacts on the wreck of the *Po*; Diver at anchor on the *Po* (below)



MICHELE FAVARON



MICHELE FAVARON



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THIS PAGE: Divers shed light on details and artifacts found on the wreck of the Italian hospital ship *Po*

second were bathrooms, within which the ceramics that covered the walls, sinks, toilets and baths were still perfectly preserved.

After the exploration of the forward part, we arrived at the imposing superstructure, which we easily entered through the large windows and got into what was once the bridge. It was necessary, however, to pay attention to sharp metal and abrasive surfaces, and be mindful that visibility could be reduced. In this manner, we explored the internal compartments, using a reel to lay out a guideline with positioning markers and cookies, as underwater signage led us to the safe way out.

The missing decks made the interior a unique and scenic environment. From where once there were the windows, the light penetrated, creating a spectacular and evocative play of shadows and colour. It is a place where everything had come to an abrupt stop,

and the diver, between those walls and those well-known rooms, could not help but reflect on the events of the war.

The ship, in addition to transporting the injured, also provided medical treatment. On board were an operating room, several clinics, and even x-ray facilities and laboratories. The wide hatches that passed through several decks were used to lower the most injured (on stretchers) to the various decks.

It was still possible to go down into the rooms below and explore the lower decks of the ship, but it was important to pay attention to sedimentation and ferrous material, which, when disturbed by passing divers or their bubbles, tended to move or detach from the ceiling, jeopardising visibility.

Under the fans still hanging from the ceilings, between stacks of plates and cups perfectly interlocked into each other (not to mention glasses, bottles, vials, hospital instruments and stacked

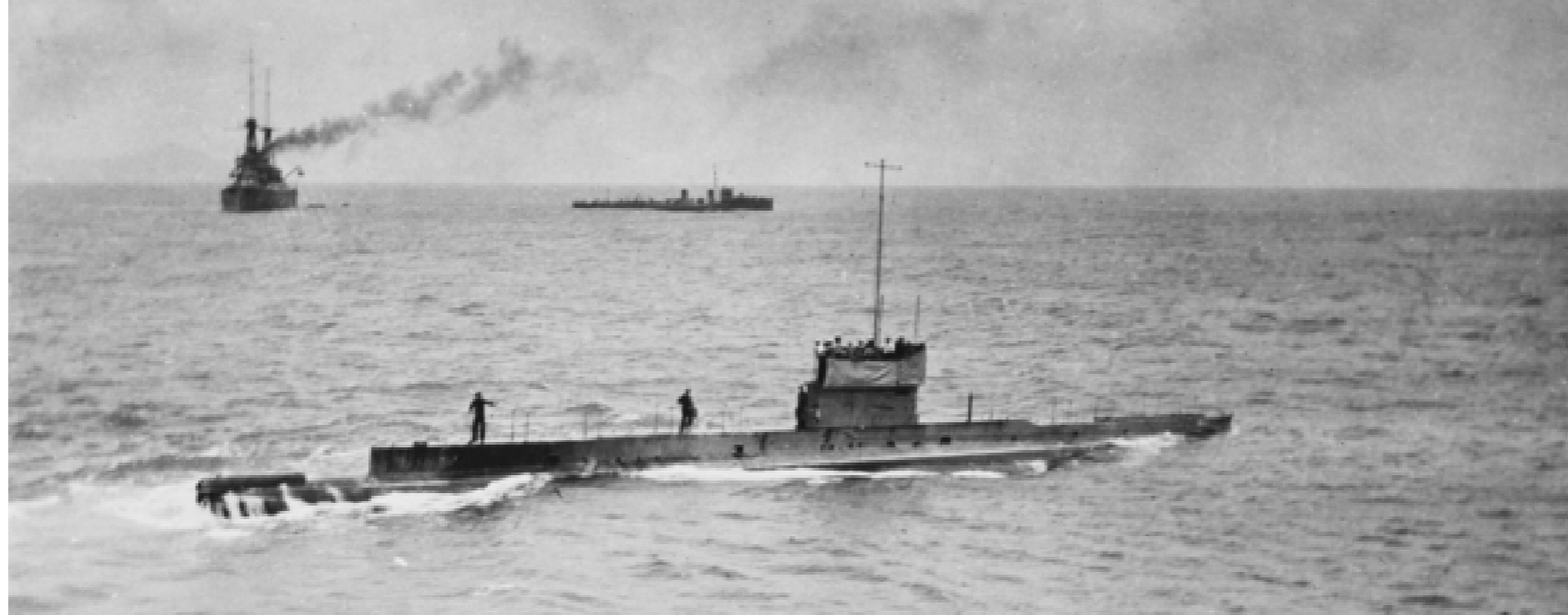
beds), one could take a leap in time and feel immersed in history. Outside the hull, proceeding towards the stern, one could see the cranes of the boats, and, just below, two floors of external corridors.

Even in the stern area, the deck was perfectly intact. Moving away a few metres in clear water, one could appreciate the elegant profile of the stern and the rudder, standing up ten metres tall. The propellers were partially covered up, but still visible, at a depth of about 30m.

The gash caused by the torpedo was located in the middle of the starboard side. The opening was wide enough to enter, while the jagged edges and metal curving inward testified to the violent explosion and the subsequent, sudden inflow of water, which spelled the ship's demise. ■



The helm of HMAS AE1



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL / PUBLIC DOMAIN

Last known image taken on 9 September 1914 of Australia's first submarine, HMAS AE1, shown here off the coast of Rabaul. The sub was lost off the coast of the Duke of York Islands in Papua New Guinea on 14 September 1914.

Australia's first submarine HMAS AE1 has been found

Australia's Minister of Defence, Marise Payne, has announced that Australia's oldest naval mystery has now been solved, following the location of HMAS AE1 in more than 300m (984ft) of water off the coast of Papua New Guinea.

HMAS AE1 was the first of two E Class submarines built for the fledgling Royal Australian Navy and was manned by Royal Navy officers with a mixed crew of sailors drawn from the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy. The submarine was lost off Rabaul on 14 September 1914, and the fate of her 35 crew members remained one of the significant mysteries of Australian military history. It was the first loss for the Royal Australian Navy and the first Allied submarine loss in World War I.

The current search was jointly funded by the Australian government, the Silentworld Foundation, the Australian National Maritime Museum and Find AE1 Ltd, utilising Fugro Survey's vessel

and search technology. The team of maritime surveyors, marine archaeologists and naval historians scoured the search area with a multi-beam echo sounder and side-scan technology in an underwater drone flying 40m above the sea bed on pre-programmed 20-hour missions. Its success is due to the efforts of these teams. The first images captured by the expedition show the vessel is remarkably well-preserved and apparently in one piece.

War grave

Following the discovery of the submarine, a small commemorative service was conducted by those on board the survey vessel to remember those officers and sailors who lost their lives 103 years ago. Efforts are being made to contact the descendants of the crew.

The Australian government will work closely with the Papua New Guinean government to consider a lasting commemoration and recognition of the crew of AE1 and to preserve the site.

The information gained from this expedition and from the research to date will greatly assist in unravelling the mystery of the loss of HMAS AE1, and will be held by the Australian National Maritime Museum for future generations to remember. Lest We Forget. ■

SOURCE: ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY



Survey data showing HMAS AE1 on the sea bed

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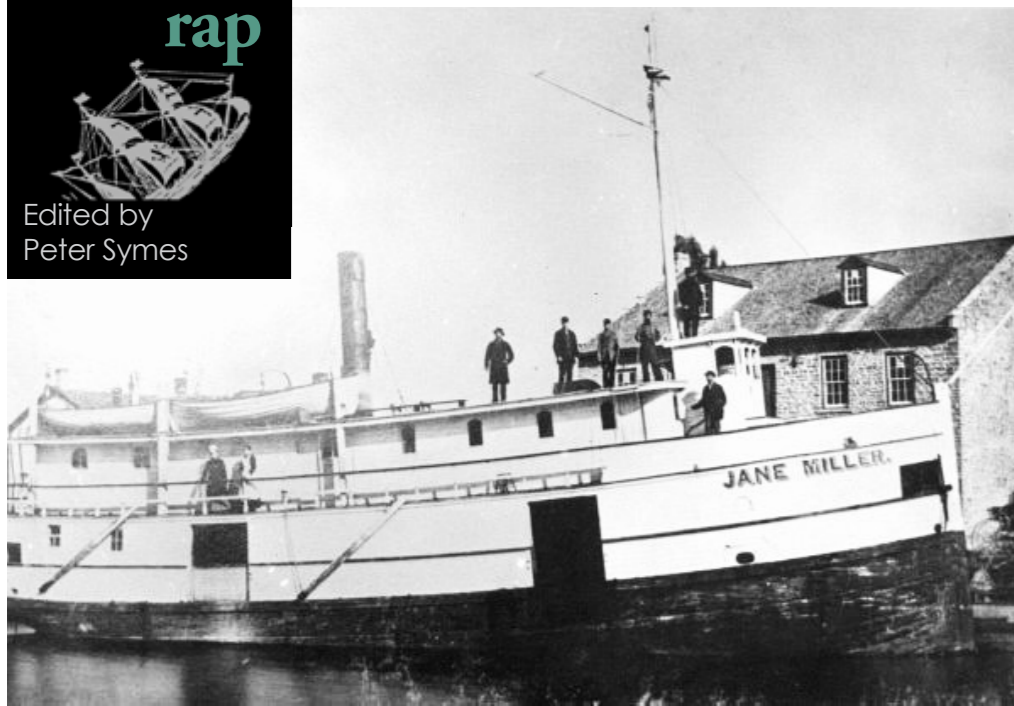
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One hundred and thirty-six years after her disappearance, the wreck of the steamer *Jane Miller* has been discovered in Lake Huron.

Ship lost in 1881 found in shallow waters in Lake Huron

The ship is mostly structurally intact with its mast still standing, rising within 23m of the surface. The shipwreck hunters also reported spotting what could be the remains of bodies.

The *Jane Miller*, a 78ft passenger and cargo steamer, has been found on the bottom of Lake Huron after going missing while en route to Manitoulin during a storm 136 years ago with over 25 people on board, all of whom drowned. The ship is mostly structurally intact with its mast still standing, rising within 23m of the surface. The top deck and pilot house have collapsed, and are structurally non-existent. The ship's wheel is still evident near the bow. The hull and main deck remain intact. A small debris field surrounds the wreck.

Shipwreck hunters Jared Daniels, Jerry Eliason and Ken Merryman

revealed their summer discovery to coincide with the anniversary of the *Jane Miller's* sinking on 25 November 1881. The wreck was found in Colpoys Bay, an inlet of Georgian Bay leading to Wiarton on the eastern side of the Bruce Peninsula north of Owen Sound in Georgian Bay.

Discovery

Finding the ship is a major discovery for the area, local marine history author Scott Cameron told the *Toronto Sun*. He said there are not many ships left from that era, and it holds substantial archeological significance. See the discovery of the *Jane Miller* described in a post at: Scubaboard.com. ■



Wreck of USS *Ward*, the first US ship to open fire in WWII, has been found

Underwater footage taken by the R/V *Petrel*, an exploration ship owned by Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen, shows what remains of the USS *Ward* where it lies at the bottom of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines, near Ponson Island. Images coming from the drone inspecting the wreck ship on 1 December showed the ship's remains heavily overgrown by marine life.

USS *Ward* fired the first Ameri-

can shot in World War II, when she engaged a Japanese submarine before the attack on Pearl Harbor, and successfully sank her opponent. The target sunk was a Japanese Ko-hyoteki-class, two-man midget submarine, thus *Ward* fired the first American shots of World War II a few hours before the Japanese carrier aircraft formally opened the conflict with their attack on the Pacific Fleet inside the harbor.

Three years later

On the morning of 7 December, three years to the day after she fired the opening shot of America's involvement in the war, while patrolling off the invasion area at Ormoc Bay, Leyte, she came under attack and was hit by a Japanese Kamikaze midship. The resulting fires could not be controlled and *Ward's* crew was ordered to abandon ship.



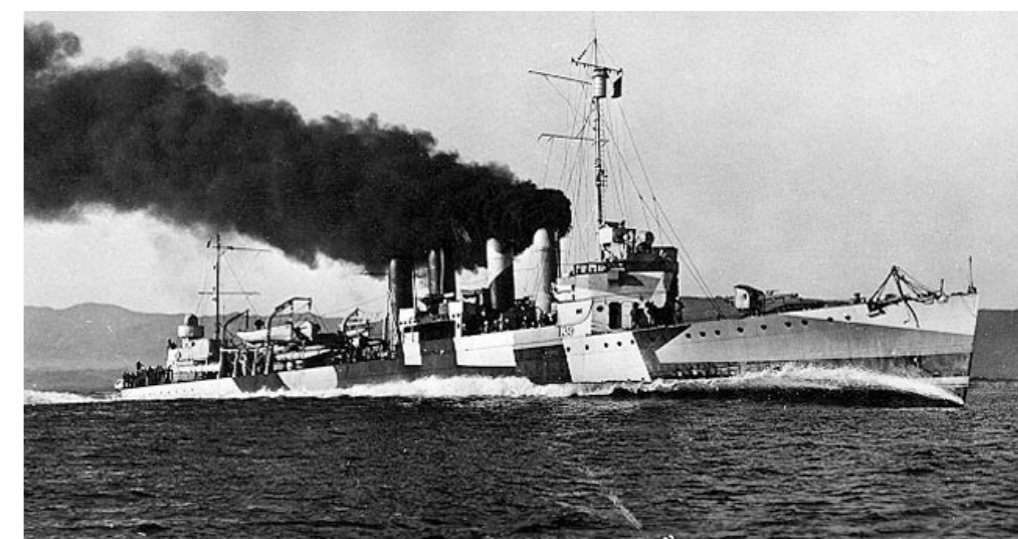
Bow of USS *Ward*. Photo courtesy of USS *Ward* Media Assets

Gun on the deck of USS *Ward*. Photo courtesy of USS *Ward* Media Assets

Further exploration

The National Museum of the Philippines has given the team of Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen the green light to explore Philippine waters for World War II-era shipwrecks, focusing particularly on the areas of the Surigao Strait and Ormoc Bay where key battles took place in October 1944, as part of the massive Allied undertaking to liberate the country from Japanese occupation.

The US billionaire's team recently found the wreck of USS *Indianapolis* in the Philippine Sea at the depth of 5,500ft. Meanwhile, it located the Italian WWII destroyer *Artigliere* in the Mediterranean Sea in March, according to Allen's website. In 2015, it also discovered the wreckage of World War II-era Japanese battleship *Musashi* 1km under the Sibuyan Sea off Ramblon. The *Musashi* was commissioned in 1942, and was then the largest battleship in naval history. It measured 263m in length, and weighed 73,000 tons when fully loaded. ■ SOURCE: PAULALLEN.COM



USS *Ward* running speed trials off the California coast in September 1918, while painted in disruptive camouflage

US NAVY / PUBLIC DOMAIN