

Deadly pair

Expedition to the wrecks of HMT JUSTICIA and her chaser, UB-124

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Thursday – 21st of May, 2019.

Belfast, TITANIC Quarter.



In last days of November 2018, Loubna Turjuman Genovese, a producer working for London, UK based TV production company called Like a Shot Entertainment (<https://www.likeashot.tv/>) informed me that the company are producing a new documentary series titled 'Shipwreck Secrets' for Yesterday (UKTV) as well as other international broadcasters and one of the episodes will be about the HMT JUSTICIA. Through her research she came across my book 'The Dutch Titanic' and ordered a copy of it to read it. After that we had the opportunity to speak with each other and discuss my research further. Finally Loubna invited me to participate in the film-making as an expert and introduced me to Matt Bone, the co-producer of the specific episode.

Matt organized the filming, part of which is a diving expedition with the help of a well-known diver, Barry McGill (who contributed to my work on the book with some of his excellent underwater photographs taken on the wrecksite). The expedition will use underwater drones for looking not only for the wreck of the HMT JUSTICIA, but the remains of the sunken UB124, one of the attacking German submarine sunk by the destroyers which escorted the JUSTICIA, so the research seems to be an exceptionally exciting task.

So far (from 2002-2008), I was primarily involved in researching 5 shipwrecks of the former Austro-Hungarian Imperial and Royal Navy. But in 2016 – thanks to the support of József Zelenák, board member of the Hungarian Divers Federation and trust of Stef Teuwen, a Belgian member of the CMAS World Underwater Federation – I was the historical leader of a large scale international expedition (a team of 60 divers from 15 countries), which made scientific research at Jütland, at the wrecks of the battle.

Thanks to this, I was able to test myself in an expedition, which has international significance. Now, this is the next time.



Wednesday – 22nd of May, 2019.

Fishermans Village Lodge, Dooey, Ireland.

At the end of a three-hour trip, the team arrived at Dooey Bay, 3 km from Downings, in the northern neighborhood of Letterkenny, Ireland, where they were accommodated in the Fishermans Village Lodge (Baile an Lascaire). The accomodation contains of three cozy little houses, leads by Heather and Michael, whose guests are mostly fishermen, anglers and wreckdivers. This is the place where the road is leading now.





The Melmore-head's wind-blown surface which planed by ice and is such bare as a man's face after shaving, has an unmistakable charm, and at the same time it has impressive power which says there's not giving life for free. But this energy is here everywhere in the countryside: in the familiar atmosphere of pubs organized around attentive conversations at tables in comfortable chairs in front of open fireplaces, in the persistent grazing of sheep which growing thick wool, in the defiant growth of emerald green grass, and in plastic waste which dropped out irresponsibly by someone in a remote corner of the world and stranded by currents on the sandy shore of the bay... And – of course – in the memory of the sailors who ever sailed in these waters.

This is what we have in our accommodation as well. Fishermans Village is a real home for wreckdivers, where not only can the kind hospitality enjoy. In the lounge there are a salvaged and restored compass and a telemotor which originally placed in the outer wheelhouse of the conning tower of a German submarine of World War I sunk nearby. On this you can see the watertight coverings of the compass, the night light and the connection rods of the transmission system. On the side of the item is the text of the manufacturer: 'Berlin-Friedenau'. Books from the shelves above the fireplace, engaging the fantasy of visitor divers, featuring nearby wrecks. Among them is a familiar volume... about the Dutch TITANIC – history of the s.s. STATENDAM.



Even Stewart Andrews, well known researcher of many wrecks including LUSITANIA and Jütland, asked for a dedication from me in 2018, when the book launched in Belfast, in the former Harland and Wolff Shipyard (birthplace of the ship), thanks to the helpful contribution of Kenneth Belshaw, exactly on the day of the 100th anniversary of the ship's sinking. Michael and I were both surprised. Me because I saw my book here, and Michael because he saw the author of his copy here. It happens that one suddenly feels that he is in the right time and in the right place. For me this was undoubtedly such a moment.



However, there was not much time to wondering: Matt Bone, producer of the episode and Jonathan, the cameraman, along with his assistant, Liam, was prepared for the first interview and was waiting in front of me to ask the first question...



Thursday – 23th of May, 2019.

North Atlantic ocean, off the Irish coasts near Malin head



Divers also arrived on Wednesday night, the local Barry McGill, the Kilkenny resident Garet O'Neil and Stewart Andrews from Dublin. All of them are experienced divers who regularly dive at Donegal shores, where more than 90 wrecks are resting from the first and the second world wars. On Thursday morning - right after breakfast - we went with them to Drongawn Lough, situated 7,9 km from Fishermans Village Lodge, to Rosapenna, where our host, Michael, took us to the high seas, with his well-equipped motorboat, ROSGUILL, optimized for diving purposes (for fixing diving bottles and for the safe storage of other equipment - clothes, cameras, etc.).





JUSTICIA's (ex-STATENDAM's) wreck is quite far from the coast, at 28 nautical miles (52 km). This was done by ROSGUILL in just over two hours. This time was spent on planning by Loubna and Matt, in order to determine the dive-to-do tasks and scenes for the film, while Jonathan, supported by Matt and Liam, recorded shots and interviews with divers and me. When I didn't have to talk, I made a reconstruction drawing of the wreckage on the basis of the results of earlier expeditions in order to help prepare Quincy Andrews, the operator of the remotely operated vehicle (ROV) which equipped with an underwater camera.



The sea was calm, but – as we were on a sea-shelf (with a depth of only 60 m) – even the smallest waves seemed to be stronger, reflecting from the nearby seafloor. So, though it was a breathtakingly beautiful sunny day, ROSGUILL was heavily rolling. Liam's stomach did not continue to obey his will, and gave himself to the sea sickness.





When we finally reached above the wreck's position, Quincy's time came, who had prepared his Deep Trekker-type vehicle, called Baxter, for the task ahead. Considering the 250 m length of the cable for remote control and image transmission, Michael maneuvered with ROSGUILL to make Baxter reach the seabed about the JUSTICIA's mid-section so that Quincy had enough long cable to run towards the bow or the stern either.

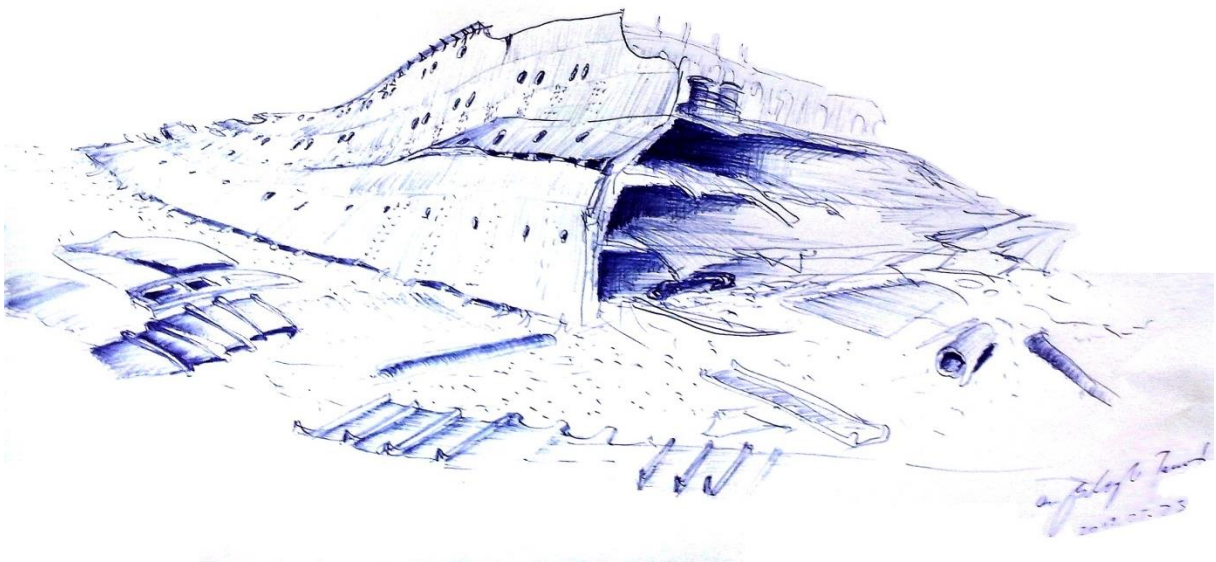
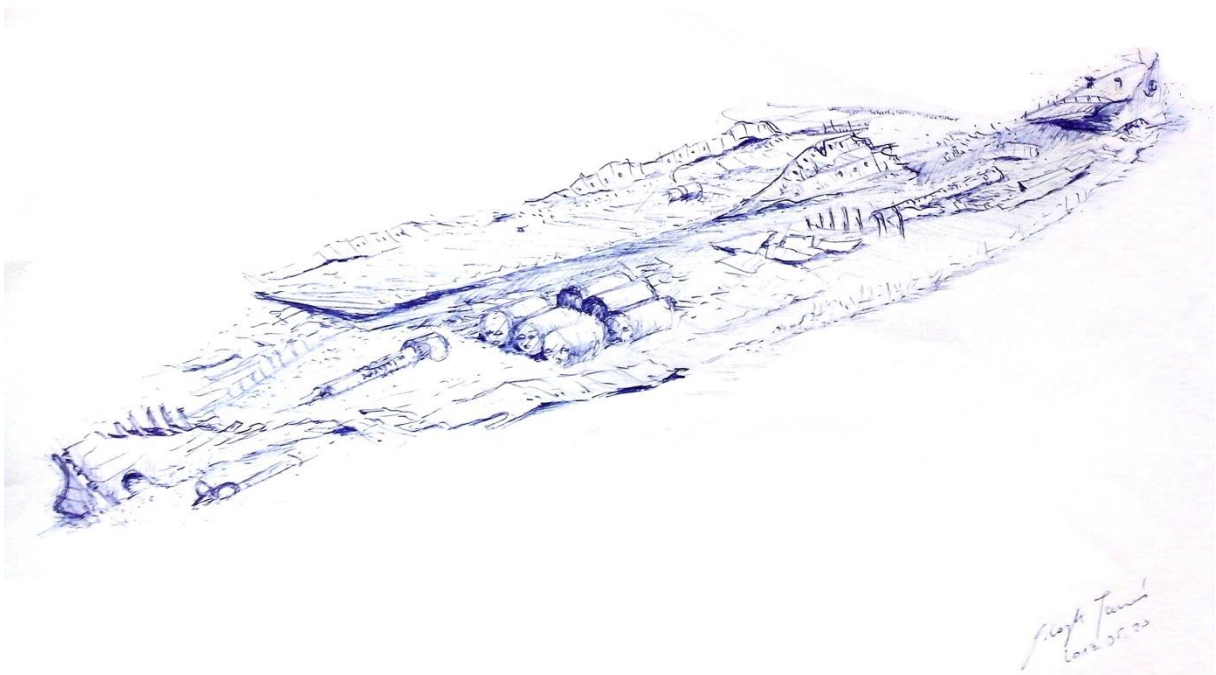
Quincy and Baxter succeeded in finding the boilers for the first attempt, from where they headed toward the ship's stern on the original portside. However, on the debris field - that covered with huge rust steel plates torn from the hull's sides and with intermittently collapsed side walls and deck remains – the operator could not find the right way, so I stood by him and followed the events on the remote control display and predict what have to been done, essentially helped on a GPS-like way to Quincy in Baxter's control. In a triple, we finally successfully reached the starboardside of the ship, starting our tour from the rear boiler room, going backwards along the ship's portside and bypassing the wreckage area behind the engine room. Here a section of the bulwark of the third-class open promenade revealed in Baxter's horizon, then the ROV returned to the boilers to attempt to approach the bow in accordance with Matt's instructions and take a long single shot along the starboardside of the hull.

But at this point, the currents were intervenes and drove the camera far beyond the desired point. The ROV's own machine power considered too low for return. Quincy therefore brought Baxter back to the surface, then Michael steered ROSGUILL into a new position, so that the current pushed the ROV directly to the wreck's bow, after it's repeated launch. While we looked at how the plastic-coated data cable moves away from the cable drum and were expecting the result, Irish coasts were suspected barely in the pale blue distance. Above the horizon, only the outlines of the highest mountains were elevated, and they were just darker than the sea mist, so we knew that those who now look from the shore to the north, certainly don't see us. However, we soon saw the JUSTICIA's wreckage on the screen again, and thanks to Michael's practice, Baxter just landed where he needed to be.



The iconic bow shows an increasingly sad picture. The deterioration of the past ten years has become more spectacular. Many argue that shipwrecks preserve episodes of history, frozen in time forever, saying that everything is intact on the spot as it happened then. This is a very romantic picture, but unfortunately not true. Shipwrecks also have their own evolution, a bit like the degradation of the human body after the burial. Just as the human remains nothing but the skeleton when the flesh and the skin disappear, now getting more and more conspicuous how the frames are becoming uncovered as the side-plates are peeled from the JUSTICIA's hull, even in those parts where the hull has more or less preserved its original ship-shape so far. The power of the current that regularly swept through the wrecksite was such strong that the entire superstructure swept away from the hull, and even the two huge, three-storeys high reciprocated steam engines, made of cast iron, were overturned. We were witnessing the passing away and could see how an ocean liner vanishes.

With respect to the phases of passing away, the four contemporary behemoths - the TITANIC sunk in 1912, the LUSITANIA sunk in 1915, the BRITANNIC sunk in 1916 and the JUSTICIA sunk in 1918 - are in four different stages of decay. This is not at all related to the age of the ships (since each liner was built in the same decade) or to the conditions of their sinking (collision and external or internal underwater explosions). Rather, it is the place of sinking. Seemingly the BRITANNIC is in the best condition. At first glance, it really is as if she was a new liner on the seafloor. However, appearances cheat: what we see is the vase of settled living creatures living in the Mediterranean climate, which locks the ship in a solid bark and taking its shape, preserving even after all the steel and iron being completely corroded. TITANIC is still the most evocative of the original, and the reason for this is the extreme depth in which she lies: at a depth of almost 5 km, there are hardly any microorganisms that could decompose her. The only exception is the bacterium called „*halomonas titanicae*“, which feeds on iron and literally digests the ship within a few decades.



In the third phase of decay, LUSITANIA stands on a shallow water at the south coast of Ireland. The ship standing on the bottom swept by the ocean currents therefore her condition is near the final collapse. If we want to search for something amongst the wrecks, we have to do it now. The last one in the row is the JUSTICIA, with her completely disintegrated body, which is literally a wreck field. She doesn't represent itself anymore as a liner, that is why it is not enough to go and see there in order to recall her back into the life: it requires a lot of expertise and lively imagination. Seeing the sad shots, we all felt that this is our job now and we are here for this.

Friday – 24th of May, 2019.

North Atlantic ocean, off the Irish coasts near Malin head

The last day of shooting dedicated to the wreckage of the submarine UB-124 which finally torpedoed and sunk the JUSTICIA. I did not have to put my feet out of the door – it was enough to look out the window – to see immediately: the weather changed fundamentally at night. There was no sign of the nice weather of the previous day. Instead of a friendly, sunny and clear blueness, the visibility narrowed to a couple of hundred meters, and everything - the sky and the ocean - was gray, like lead or steel, with no other color, just a little white of the frothy surf breaking on the shore rocks. But even it could only be seen, not to hear, because the stubbornly pelting rain had been turned down all the sound completely. I remembered unwittingly that after all, we're not going to the JUSTICIA, but to the submarine that destroyed her...



The depressing weather has made the team silent at breakfast. Yet the fact that no word has fallen on the weather was that, as if it was only the unspoken determination, that we will run out to the sea somehow anyway. We started off at the usual time, and two hours later, while we drop anchor over the wreck, the seascape changed slowly as well. The angry gray gave his place to the blue, which was still dark, but the clouds decomposed, showing that relief was coming. Barry McGill - the first diver - began to wear his dry suit and attach his rebreather to his back. By the time he checked his camera, the sky was revealed, and when he jumped into the water, the weather was almost the same as the day before. Michael also noted that it is a rarity to dive for two consecutive days in this country. So we felt lucky again.



After Barry, Garet and Steward followed. All three took a GOPRO camera attached to their equipment, and their job was to work on a coordinated way together with Quincy in order to capture as many pictures and shots as possible from the submarine wreck. It was a big deal, since this is the first underwater video footage about the submarine which torpedoed the JUSTICIA (only underwater photographs have been taken so far).



This Friday was a particularly big day for Barry, because - followed the information from the fishermen - he was who localized the wreck and was the one who identified it as UB-124, which is particularly great accomplishment when we consider that another German submarine wreck was found in nearby, so it had to be decided which one was the UB-124. Finally two circumstances helped. On the one hand, the ammunition was found on the other submarine, produced after the sinking of the JUSTICIA, demonstrated by the date engraved in the cartridge shell. On the other hand, the UB-124 had only one aft torpedo tube. Among the two submarine wrecks, just the other had this characteristic.

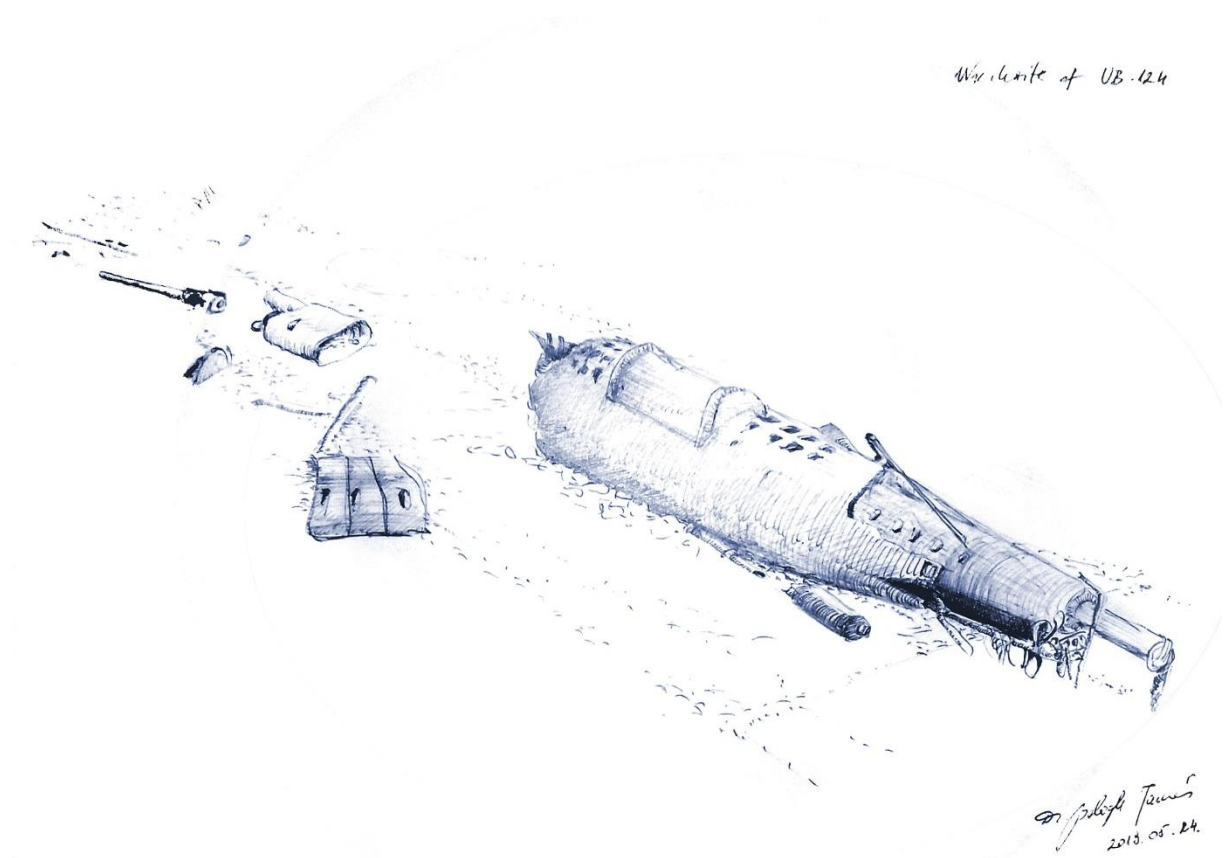
Based on the records, heavy damages of the hull became known. On June 20, 1918, between 11:30 and 13:00, at least 50 depth charges were thrown near the U-boat. At 14:00 then 5 bombs exploded directly on the ship. Only the bulbs of the electric lighting loosened, otherwise there were no visible damage. Regarding these attacks, the commander thought it was safer to stay grounded. At 19:00 pm, he gave orders to fill the tanks with air in order to reach the surface. The U-boat suddenly lost its trim and shot at an angle of 50° to the surface. Acid came out of the batteries and bilge water came into the battery boxes, causing chlorine gas to develop. The regulator tanks probably leaked as a result of detonation of the depth charges or water pressure at the bottom. The bow broke the surface steeply, but the U-boat quickly balanced, started the undamaged diesel engines, and quickly tried to escape. Three British destroyers observed this from about 5 nm distance and approached. After 10 minutes, they opened fire from their guns on UB 124. It was claimed that the submarine was not hit by the gunfire. The commander ordered the crew on deck and instructed chief engineer Karl Engstfeld to sink the boat. Lieutenant Paul Seevers and the engineer stayed on the bridge, as no one expected a quick sinking. The rest of the crew jumped into the water to save themselves. A few seconds later, however, the explosive charges exploded and UB 124 sank suddenly. The destroyers circled the spot, but moved away in search of a sighted periscope. After 20 minutes the survivors were taken on board by the destroyer MARNE.

In accordance with the events as summarized above, the entire front part of the UB-124 is missing in front of the conning tower. The tower, the periscope, and the deck-cannon are separated from the back of the hull, and laying on the seabed. The outer plating also disappeared from the tower and the remaining part of the hull, with only the pressure hull visible. The submarine's remaining aft part is leaning to its right side about 45 degrees to the bottom, and contains diesel engines, propellers, steering gear and rear torpedo tube. The motors are well observable when looking at the fracture. There is a ballast tank on the port- and starboard side of the hull. Two of the air tanks lie on the seabed, farther away. Moving toward the stern, we can see the disconnected connection rods of the steering gear, while on the left-hand side is in its original position, the right-hand side facing the seafloor. Below these are the powerful structure of the propellers.



The propeller-blades were bent, suggesting that they were still turning on the bottom. However, two of the blades on the left-hand propeller, bended into opposite direction (comparing to each other), which is only possible if the direction of the propeller's rotation is changed once.

About this, Barry reported. And I could make the actual drawings of the wreck, based on his narration, and the recordings made by Garet and Stewie, and by Baxter's camera as well.



According to the ancient Greeks, there are three kinds of people: the living, the dead and the one who goes to the sea, and only the one dies really, who is forgotten. I felt that the nice weather and the calm sea was a message. As if we were given the opportunity to recall a more than a hundred-year-old story. It was an inspiring feeling to think that we express our gratitude for this opportunity by doing a good job.