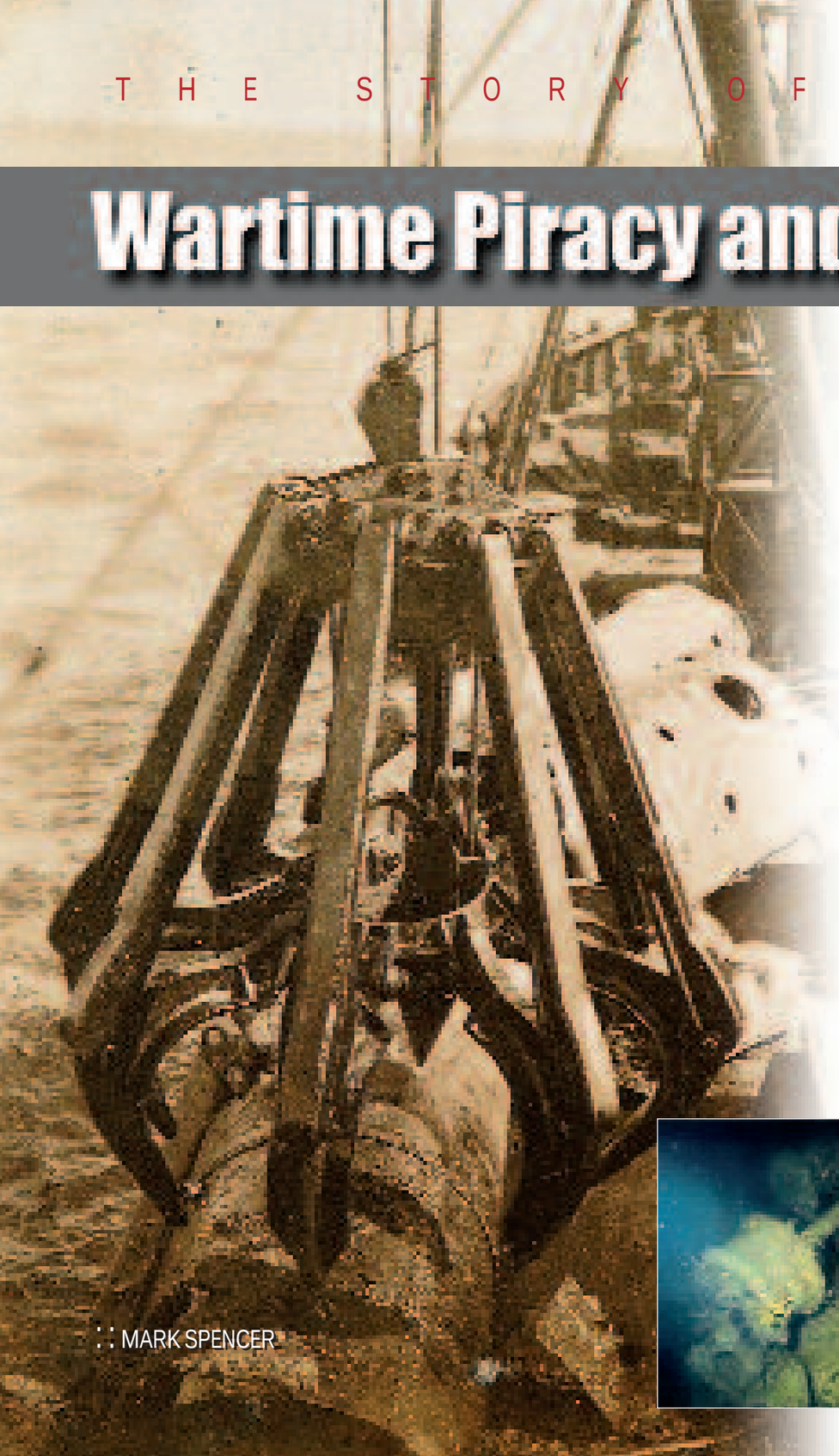
THE STORY OF THE CUMBERLAND

Wartime Piracy and Deep Water Salvage



:: MARK SPENCER

This page: The grab of the Foremost 17 holds a donkey boiler from the wreck of the *Cumberland*. Photo courtesy of Alan Martin.

A winch near the bow of the *Cumberland* wreck.

Facing page: The *Cumberland* Dive Team (8,9/11/03) on the Eden wharf. (Lto R): Kevin Okeby, Paul Garske, Samir Alhafith, Simon Mitchell, David Apperley, Mark Spencer

Jason McHattan explores the scattered debris field on the starboard hold area of the *Cumberland* wreck at 98 meters, where explosives and salvage work in 1951 caused much damage. (Nikkor 16mm F/E lens in Subal housing, 1600 ISO col neg film, twin Ikelite SS200 strobes)

Jason McHattan explores the collapsed hold region of the *Cumberland* on the starboard side. The bottom was prolific with seawhips and candelabra octocorals. (16mm F/E lens in Subal housing and 1600 ISO col neg film)

NOW LYING IN 95 METRES OFF THE BORDER BETWEEN VICTORIA AND NEW SOUTH WALES, THE BRITISH STEAMSHIP CUMBERLAND WAS THE FIRST VICTIM OF WAR IN AUSTRALIAN WATERS. OVER 30 YEARS LATER, THIS SHIPWRECK ALSO BECAME THE FOCUS OF ONE OF THE MOST DARING SALVAGE EFFORTS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY.

Practically unknown is that a disguised German raider/minelayer *Wolf* visited Australia's east coast on 3 July 1917 and seeded the waters off Gabo Island just south of Eden with about 25 mines. The SS *Cumberland*, a steel twin-screw 'shelter-deck' type vessel of 8,992 tons gross, 144.4 metres (474 ft) long and 18 metre (60ft) beam was the unfortunate first and officially the only victim to the *Wolf* in Australian waters.

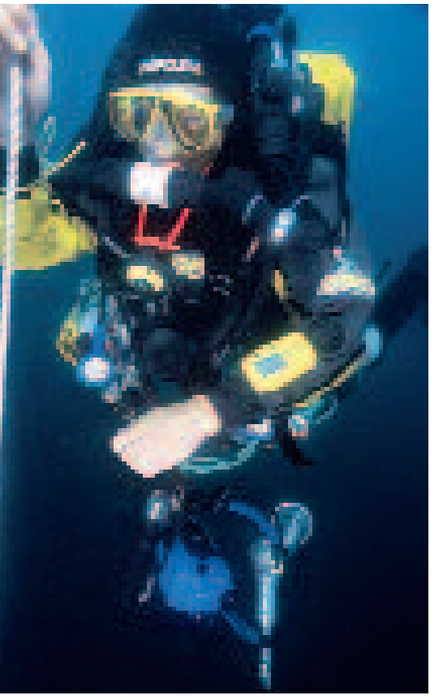
Laden with wool, frozen meat and a valuable cargo of copper, lead and zinc ingots, *Cumberland* was heading south from Sydney on its way back to England. About 10 nautical miles off Gabo Island on 6 July 1917, those onboard felt a violent explosion. At first it was thought the explosion was internal and perhaps the result of espionage. Despite the rapid flooding of the vessel, *Cumberland* was beached at Gabo Island, where the gaping 30-ft hole in the number one hold region was sealed as best as possible with stout oregon planks and a huge mat of canvas and padded wool.

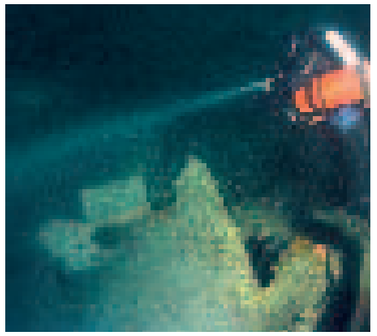
After five weeks of patching-up at Gabo Island, the *Cumberland* was towed by the stern towards Twofold Bay for more extensive repairs. A strengthening nor-easterly wind and rising seas proved too much for the temporary repairs and the tug boats were forced to cut their lines and let her sink on 11 August 1917, about five miles southeast of Green Cape in New South Wales. All crew on the *Cumberland* were safely transferred.

THE SALVAGE OF TREASURE IN 1951

The *Cumberland*'s copper, lead and zinc ingots were valued at over £300,000. British salvage company Risdon-Beazley sent *Foremost 17*, one of her salvage ships, to Australia in 1951 to recover this valuable cargo (excepting the zinc, which would have quickly deteriorated). In an amazing 18 month operation that lasted until March 1953, the salvors successfully recovered 1825 tons of ingots – 95% of the original cargo.

The *Foremost 17* employed a technique of deep-water salvage used on both the wreck of the *Egypt* in 1922 and *Niagara* in 1941, essentially pioneered by British engineer and author of *Deep Diving and Submarine Operations*, Sir Robert Davis D.Sc. in 1912. Because of the limitations of breathing air in flexible dress at working depths beyond 60 metres, it was considered safer to lower divers to the bottom in a one-atmosphere sealed





chamber with observation windows. Air was breathed supplied by pipes from the surface or via pressurised cylinders attached to the outside of the chamber. A suitable CO^2 scrubber was included. Telephone communication linked the diver to the surface and a strong floodlight could also be attached to the top of the chamber.

Risdon-Beazley divers Frank Higgins and Dick Young took it in turns to descend to the *Cumberland* in an observation chamber and directed the placement of explosives over the hold region. Each was brought to the surface, the explosives detonated, then they were lowered again to direct positioning of a three-jawed grab which cleared the path into the hold region containing the ingots.

The *Foremost 17* then traveled to New Zealand to successfully recover another 30 gold bars from the *Niagara* in 1953. This followed the work of the Australian-New Zealand team on the *Claymore* in 1941, where 555 gold bars (valued at the time at £2,388,953) were recovered in what is still today considered one of the most remarkable deep water salvage operations in world history. The ability of the *Foremost 17* to recover another 30 bars was almost certainly due to the use of a more pointed three-jawed grab as opposed to the broad flat edge of the two-jawed grab used by the *Claymore*. 'Johnno' Johnstone, chief diver on the *Claymore* salvage, assisted the Risdon-Beazley group by guiding them to the right location on the wreck 12 years later.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE CUMBERLAND

In April 2001 CSIRO Marine Research in Tasmania, in collaboration with the National Oceans Office, carried out an extensive seabed mapping survey of the off the coast of Green Cape using an advanced echo sounder aboard RV *Southern Surveyor*. Due to poor processing capabilities on the vessel, it wasn't until July 2001 that a wreck was clearly shown in the bathymetry maps obtained with enhanced post-processing software. This information was supplied to Tim Smith, maritime archaeologist with the New South Wales Heritage Office in Sydney. Local fishing operators also provided valuable information on the site. Based on the size of the wreck found by the CSIRO and its position, Tim Smith felt the wreck was probably the *Cumberland*.

THE SYDNEY PROJECT GROUP CONFIRMS THE WRECK'S IDENTITY

The Sydney Project (SP) was formed in 2002 due to the inspiration of Sydney trimix diver Samir Alhafith. Samir felt that a collective of experienced trimix divers – both open circuit and rebreather users – would be able to combine talents to more safely explore depths beyond 90 metres. As an active member of the Sydney Project, I was informed of the discovery of a shipwreck thought to be the *Cumberland* by Tim Smith. The wreck awaited positive identification by a team of divers or by ROV inspection. The Sydney Project divers had been practising for just such dives off Sydney's fishing grounds – the 'Peaks' – in depths of 110 metres. This was an ideal chance to implement the diving procedures we'd been perfecting for the past year. SP member David Apperley, who also holds the distinction with New Zealand's Tim Cashman, of being the first diver to descend to the *Niagara* in 2001, travelled to Eden on 25 October 2003. He met up with Victorian divers and Maritime Archeology Association of Victoria members Greg Hodge and Mark Ryan. Together, they sought the ideal working platform for the diving team and travelled to the wreck site to confirm its exact position.

SIMON WAVED FRANTICALLY... HE'D MADE THE MOST IMPORTANT DISCOVERY OF THE WEEKEND. THE BRASS LETTERS 'M', 'U' AND 'E' WERE LYING LOOSELY ON THE BOW PLATING, CLEARLY IDENTIFYING THE SHIP AS THE CUMBERLAND.

This page: The heavy rail-track 'depth accelerant' with hydro-dynamic fins welded for an undeviated descent in currents. It lived up to all expectations. The shot line is obscured by the fish. This was our descent and ascent line.

David Apperley decompresses at 6 metres after a 30 minute dive on the *Cumberland*. He's using an Inspiration closed-circuit rebreather. David has also dived on the famous *Niagara* wreck off New Zealand where the *Foremost 17* salvage team recovered 30 bars of gold in 1953 shortly after their salvage of copper and lead off the Cumberland in 1951.

Possible evidence of severe tearing of metal caused by explosions and grab of salvage vessel *Foremost 17* on starboard side about third of way between bridge and bow, in 98 metres. (Nikkor F/E lens in Subal housing with 1600 ISO col neg film and twin Ikelite SS200 strobes)

boat operators Bret O'Donnell and Peter Cooke. The divers comprised eight SP team members: David Apperley, Jason McHattan, Samir Alhafith, hyperbaric physician Simon Mitchell, Kevin Okeby, Peter Szyszka, Paul Garske and Mark Spencer. Greg Hodge and Mark Ryan couldn't join us, but mounted a successful dive expedition to the wreck the following week with fellow divers Craig Howell and Jeff Wright. All eight SP divers descended to the wreck in calm seas with virtually no current on Saturday 8 November. We split into two groups – while one was in the water, the other deployed the decompression station.

On the first day of diving, accompanied by Jason McHattan (MK15 CCR) and Kevin Okeby (OC), I took my housed 16mm F/E lens, high-speed film and twin Ikelite SS200 strobes, hoping to use ambient light to capture a large and identifiable part of the ship, such as the stern. But we landed in the debris field just alongside the forward hold torn apart by the *Foremost 17* in 1953. We were inside the current-scoured region at 98 metres depth and I had very little to photograph that resembled a ship! Though visibility exceeded 14 metres, illumination was very poor. The strobes were a definite necessity. A later inspection of those photographs revealed useful information though, especially evidence of the effects of explosives used in the earlier salvage efforts.

Rebreather divers Samir Alhafith, Paul Garske and Simon Mitchell came across a copper ingot. I was enthralled by this news and determined to photograph it the next day!

Sunday saw an almost equally calm day with very little current. I decided to go to the bottom with a narrower lens (20mm) attached to a different camera and housing/strobe set-up. When I'd almost hit the bottom, I heard a loud bang. It didn't sound good. My left (master) strobe had imploded. I photographed the 'Depth Accelerant' (our shot at the end of the descent line), then Kevin Okeby kindly posed with the copper ingot. I took several shots, thinking the right strobe would still be working. For some inexplicable

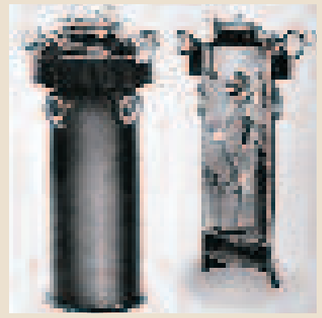
Boiler and other debris brought on board *Foremost 17* with the grab after explosives were first used on *Cumberland*. Photo courtesy of Alan Martin.

***Foremost 17* in dry dock. Photo courtesy Alan Martin.**

A diver inside the 6' 3" high Galeazzi observation chamber on board Risdon Beazley's *Foremost 17*. The man to the left must be very tall! The ship's grab is on the right. Photo courtesy Alan Martin.

***Foremost 17*'s grab brings aboard plating from the TSS Cumberland wreck. Photo courtesy Alan Martin.**

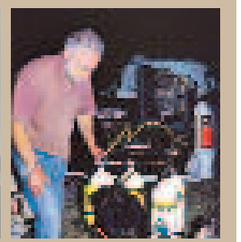
Crewmen aboard Foremost 17 wash the copper (straight edges) and lead (notched) ingots. The Sydney Project divers identified a lead ingot on the wreck. Photo courtesy Alan Martin.



Above: Robert Davis's original observation chamber designed in 1912. The Risdon Beazley salvage group appear to have used a model of chamber designed by Italian engineer Signor Roberto Galeazzi. Illustration from *Deep Diving and Submarine Operations* by R. Davis, reproduced with permission from Lee Selisky

A Siebe Gorman 'Davis-style' observation chamber similar to that used on *Cumberland* in 1951-53. The Risdon Beazley salvage group appear to have used a model of chamber designed by Italian engineer Signor Roberto Galeazzi. Illustration from *Deep Diving and Submarine Operations* by R. Davis, reproduced with permission from Lee Selisky.



**This page from left to right: A Juveline Whitefin swell shark on the Cumberland wreck. Stills capture off video footage.
The brass letters "M", "U" & "E" lie loosely on collapsed bow plating, confirming the identity of the wreck as indeed the Cumberland.
The Spirit of Eden, a 12-metre Cougar Catamaran with ample deck space for our operations.
Kevin Okeby fills tanks with oxygen and helium with the aid of a Haskell pump.**

reason, only one shot turned out – the picture of the 'depth accelerant'. We have no publishable images of the ingot – yet!

Meanwhile, divers Simon Mitchell, Paul Garske and Samir Alhafith, all on CCR's, traveled to the bow with Samir on video and Simon using the comeback reel. Simon waved frantically to the others. He'd made the most important discovery of the weekend – the brass letters 'M', 'U' and 'E' were lying loosely on bow plating, clearly identifying the ship as the *Cumberland*. Their bottom time was 27 minutes. Kevin, Peter and I, using Open Circuit scuba, were all restricted to about 17 minutes. Rebreathers are clearly the way to go at these depths!

But the discovery and photographic recording (video by David Apperley and Samir Alhafith and my stills) of the brass letters, animal bones (frozen meat), copper ingot and twisted, torn metal plating were overwhelming evidence of the wreck being the SS *Cumberland*. We'd carried out the first dives on this truly historic shipwreck that comes with an exciting story of wartime piracy and deep-water salvage. We look forward to joining forces with our Melbourne friends and further documenting this important relic of Australian maritime heritage.

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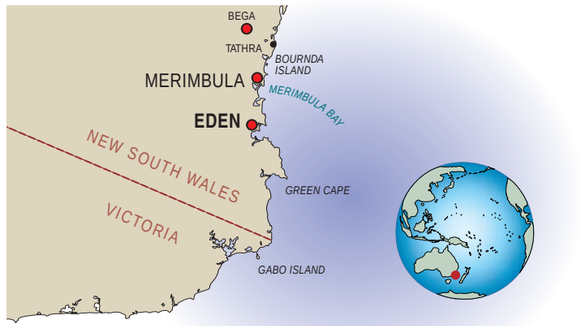
Alan Martin, a *Foremost 17* crew member, for allowing use of his personal photographs.
SP members David Apperley, Paul Garske and Kevin Okeby for their special input to the success of the weekend of 8 and 9 November 2003.



According to Roy Alexander, a prisoner aboard the raider at the time and author of *The Cruise of the Raider Wolf*, 25 mines were dispersed. Other sources mention as few as 15 mines.
It has been rumoured that the SS *Undola* and the schooners *Handa Isle* and *Amelia J* may also have hit *Wolf*'s mines.
Report by Rudy Kloser, CSIRO Marine Acoustics Research, Shipwreck (*Cumberland*) mapping using Simrad EM 1002", 10 Dec 2001.

Visit www.sydneyproject.com for more about the group's members, goals and objectives.