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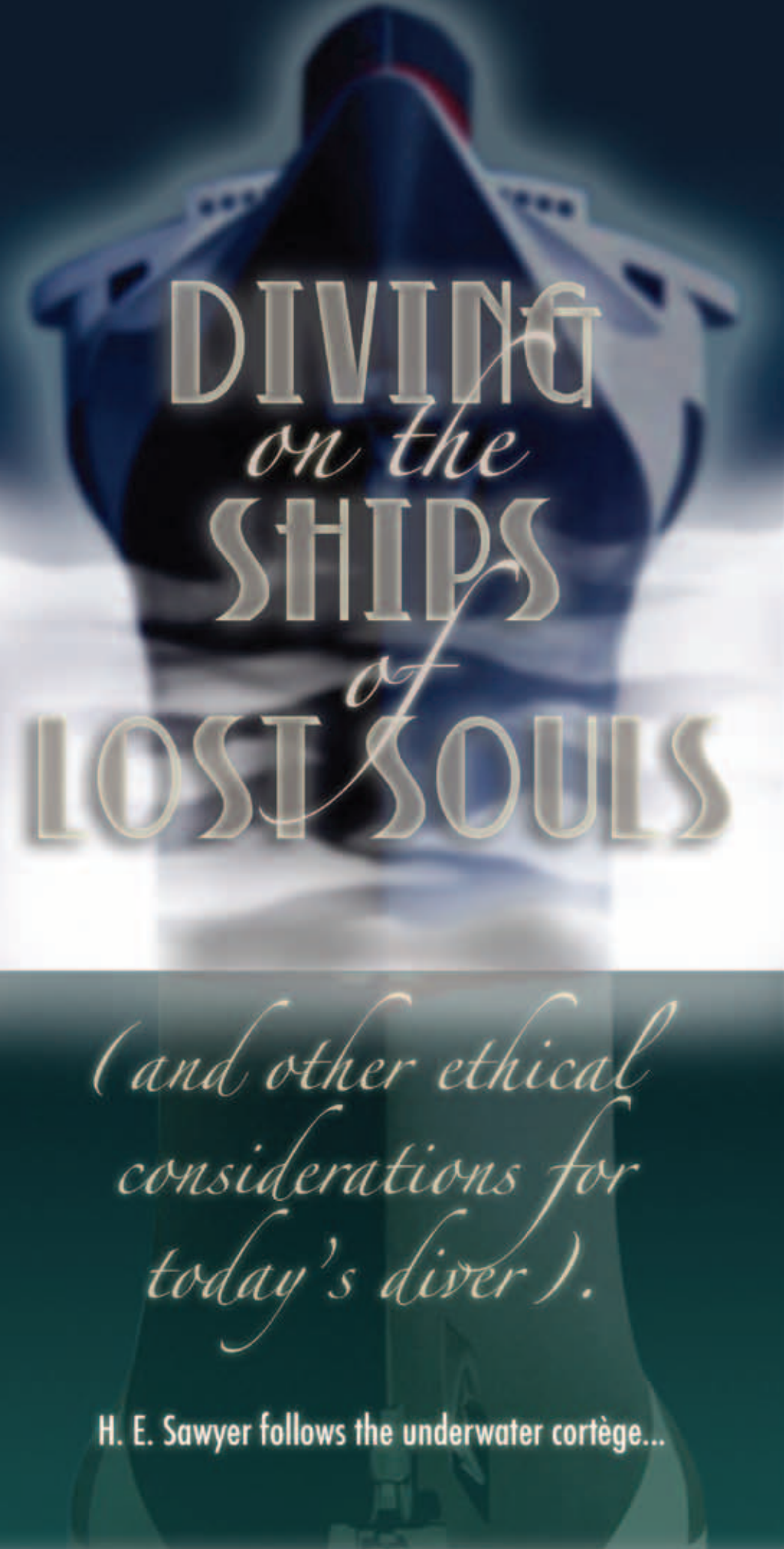
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It’s a beautiful morning.

Our liveaboard sits brilliant white against the dreamy blue, and the sun scatters a million diamonds on the surface of the Egyptian Red Sea. Conditions couldn’t be better for the final dive of the week, and yet some of our party are sitting this one out, because down there, just over the rail off the port side, lies the wreck of the *Salem Express*.

Sunk after striking a reef during a storm on the night of December 15, 1991, on a voyage from Jeddah to Safaga, the roll-on roll-off passenger ferry went down in the space of 10 minutes with the loss of 470 lives. In spite of intensive recovery efforts in the tragedy’s aftermath the wreck was eventually sealed with bodies still inside.

Perhaps I should say that the mood on the dive deck was sombre, that we hardly said a word as we geared up, each of us lost in our private thoughts. Or, that dark clouds blocked the sun as a threatening wind rose, and the crew began to pray. It would be evocative, atmospheric, and melodramatic, and the sort of thing Clive Cussler might conjure up. But it would be disingenuous.

Truth is, I am up for this. I really want to dive the *Salem Express*. I’d already made the decision to dive the wreck, if I had the opportunity, and having made my choice I’ve already squared away the morality and the ethics of what I’m doing. So I know why I’m going over the side and I’m satisfied that I’m diving for the right reasons. I’m not going as a passing ghoul, but because I’m drawn to wrecks, period. I would be diving the *Salem* if she’d been sent to the seabed as an artificial reef, having served for decades without encountering so much as a squall, or been responsible for a single case of mal de mer.

Yet it would be foolish, as a recreational diver, not to address the moral aspect of this particular logbook entry considering the *Salem* is a tomb, and a relatively recent one at that. And also because I’m already finning down towards the once personal possessions that litter the seabed in the shadow of the wreck: a crusty ghetto blaster, a shoe, an empty suitcase. It’s poignant, and quite apart from the respect we’d show those who chose not to dive the wreck, none of us

fanning out along the hull will be beaming from ear to ear and punching the air when we return to the dive deck.

This isn’t the first wreck I’ve explored where lives were lost. It’s not even the first this week. Thirty-one went down with the *Carnatic*. Nine on the *Thistlegorm*. Two on the *Rosalie Moller*. Indeed, my interest in wrecks stemmed from diving WWII casualties in the Pacific theatre where there were horrendous casualties, and where human remains still lie, although I’ve never seen any personally, and have never had the desire to seek them out.

It doesn’t take many war wreck dives before one is compelled to confront what it must have been like, the horror for those aboard as their island home sank beneath them. The drone of the bombers, angry specks in the sky homing in on their kill, the blast lifting men off their feet, the fire, the unbearable heat, choking smoke, confusion, panic, even the burning smell. How could I even begin to relate to that carnage?

They say the wreck of the *Yamagiri Maru* at Chuuk is a ‘must-dive’, without ever saying exactly why. Is it because the skull of a sailor’s head is fused into the wreck? When I dive Chuuk will I too photograph the iconic remains of the unfortunate unknown as so many passing visitors have before? Would that be tasteful? When the cortege of Diana, Princess of Wales passed, it was an effort to look at the coffin, much less use the camera I’d taken to capture the moment. When the opportunity arose suddenly the notion seemed trite.

I am intrigued by the metamorphosis a wreck undergoes as it slips from one world to another, where corals and other marine life soften it, changing its form and purpose.

There’s a certain frisson, a fascination, seeing the familiar – a ship or plane – in unfamiliar surroundings. It’s the surreal quality of these images that captivates me. I spend far too much ‘wreck time’ trawling YouTube for video clips, reading books, listening to the experts, researching and planning trips, buying the T-shirts. And, not least, I sport the anorak of a wreck diver ‘bitten by rust’.

So I personally don’t have an objection to diving a wreck that holds the dead, whether it sank in 1941, or 1991, whether I knew there were remains there or not, whether they were soldiers, or as with the *Salem Express*, pilgrims. It is the wreck itself I dive for, rather than any sentiment or history attached to it. But you can understand that this is very much a personal decision, and I’d always respect a diver who says, “No thanks”.

On this question views are polarized among divers; further questions arise. Is it a simple matter of a sliding ‘comfort’ scale for each of us to adjust according to the circumstances of a ship’s sinking?

Are we pragmatic about the loss of life through natural causes, or force majeure, as with the *SS Yongala* in 1911, lost with all 121 souls in a cyclone off Bowling Green Cape, Queensland, Australia. Or through a tragic accident, such as when the *Liban* collided with the steamship *Insulaire* off Marseilles in 1903, taking nearly 200 to their graves.

And what of acts of war? Was there a perceived difference between the loss of men on a fighting ship, able to defend itself and purpose built to sink others, in contrast to the press-ganged merchant and support vessels of Chuuk, or Coron, which were sitting ducks?

What of the loss of a Hell Ship? Take for example the *Oryoku Maru*, bound for Japanese labour camps with Allied PoWs, who died of suffocation and starvation in the holds, until sunk by American aircraft in an attack that killed 300 more? Hell Ship survivors are determined to tell their story, and to preserve the memory of their comrades for future generations. Yet life goes on and remains of the *Oryoku Maru* in Subic Bay, the Philippines, arguably a monument to those victims, was flattened and demolished so as not to impede a shipping lane.

If these distinctions seem contrived, consider the wreck diver who pulls a face at the prospect of diving a ship intentionally sunk as an artificial reef, versus one that sinks during active service? Or, what about the dive operator who promotes the weaponry of his premier wreck dive. When Bikini Atoll presented its wrecks, prospective divers were left in no doubt that the war records of these fighting ships were formidable and even though the ships were laying in state on the seabed, their guns pointed to the surface, “as if ready for action”, unlike the auxiliary fleet at Chuuk.

And on a personal note, I’m aware that the guns, bombs and munitions that I photograph – slavishly – on so many wreck dives are for my memory, not for others.

Rightly or wrongly, we rate loss on a daily basis watching the news. Who? Where? When? How, and how many? What is our proximity to the event? What is an appropriate reaction?

Divers will always visit these watery memorials as long as there’s something to see. And they’ll never know the names of those lost with the ship, and frankly they won’t care whether they’re ‘our brave lads’, or not.

All the artefacts that can be pilfered probably will be, and yet we can still enjoy a view of the past through the unique window that is a sunken shipwreck. The twisted metal remembers and shows us, so we can see first hand evidence of the catastrophe. A testament to this is the deck of the Thistlegorm, peeled back like the lid of a sardine can after a bomb hit her magazine. Recreational divers are accident investigators; we get to play a CSI kind of game.

This doesn’t happen with disasters in the everyday terrestrial world, where the site is cordoned off, investigated, sanitized, and put back into service. This is true of sites such as the Hillsborough Stadium, where 96 Liverpool football fans were killed in a 1989 crowd surge or, more recently, at the sites of the 2005 terrorist attacks on the London Transport system.

Memorials to the victims are put in place, life goes on, and in time it’s all but forgotten. The disaster of the *Salem Express* will fade as the years pass, as it has already with some of its Red Sea neighbours. Survivors of the trauma will die, and the wreck will deteriorate. Eventually, we’re left with its virtual past of reworked stories and embellished memories, until a myth stands in its place. It’s inevitable, of course, but at least those who were lost won’t be completely forgotten. You might ask yourself who will be visiting your own plot under the mud a hundred years from now?

Which brings us to the subject of wreck recovery, and very murky waters indeed. Bringing a wreck to the surface is a tricky business, as Lew Grade, and anyone who has sat through the god-awful film version of the book *Raise the Titanic*, will appreciate. That said, it has been done notably in 1982 with the pride of King Henry VIII, the *Mary Rose*, which sank in 1545 with huge loss of life. They even showed her salvage live on TV, and I have to say it was gripping stuff. There was a moment when the supporting steel cradle slipped, threatening to drop the wreck back to the depths. I literally jumped in my chair. You couldn’t make that stuff up.

A section of the VOC ship *Batavia*, lost in 1629, was also recovered in the 1970s, along with human remains, and is now impressively exhibited in the Western Australian Maritime Museum at Fremantle. As recently as December 2007, the Chinese raised an 800 year old cargo ship loaded with porcelain, dubbed the *Nanhai 1*, from the South China Sea.

The reclamation of these time capsules after centuries underwater elicits wonderment and fascination worldwide, not the controversy you might expect for disturbing a final resting place, which underscores the contention that the passage of time determines our response.

And after centuries at the bottom, there's no one living who might have lost relatives or loved ones in the initial tragedy.

So what about a fatal wreck raised in living memory? Like most English schoolboys of the 60s, I'd grown up with the *Bluebird*. Her pilot, Donald Campbell, CBE, was the stuff of legend and cigarette cards. He'd broken world speed records in both the 1950s and 1960s, then went on to set both land and water speed records in 1964. He is to this day the only person to set both records in the same year.

In 1967 he took his jet-propelled hydroplane, *Bluebird K7* onto Coniston Water in an attempt to smash his own water speed record, but on the second run, disaster struck. Travelling at over 300 mph (485kph) the nose lifted, the boat somersaulted, hung for an instant, then disintegrated on impact. The nation watched the black and white footage and heard his last words. It was a time for stiff upper lips.

The wreck lay undisturbed until a Project Bluebird team of divers led by Bill Smith discovered and raised the wreckage from the lake in October 2000. The following June they found and recovered Campbell's body, which had been thrown clear in the accident.

What intrigued me was that the craft had been raised against the wishes of some members of the Campbell family. I duly contacted Smith. I wanted to know how he'd managed to resolve the moral issues attached to the project. He told me, "If I had a pound for every time an attempt has been made to drag me into this argument..."

He wouldn't be drawn further; suffice to say that, "It can be done." His comments reiterate those of many people who find the prospect of recovery distasteful. Today, diving is more affordable and accessible, as are the costs of underwater exploration and detection equipment that give divers a high tech edge and a much greater chance of success in their search endeavours. Indeed one Coniston local commented on the sheer number of divers in the lake, searching like mad. "Trying to find Donald Campbell's boat has become like a search for the Holy Grail," he said.

The truth is that if it hadn't been Bill Smith and his team salvaging *Bluebird*, it would've been someone else. And it might have been a person or persons lacking the commitment, care and sensitivity exhibited by members of Project Bluebird.

It's easy to imagine the wreck discovered and stripped clean of 'trophies' that hold importance only to those who recovered them. And when these people have shuffled off to a nursing home, then what? Likely their kids will view this dusty mantelpiece stuff out of context and discard it as junk.

So the wreck could never be left in situ. The very nature of the souvenir hunter is justification for salvaging the wreck, for it's own protection, while conveniently eroding any moral objections in the process. It becomes a choice of a proper recovery and preservation or being thoughtlessly stripped by persons unknown and scattered to the four winds.

I wouldn't want to end on such a cynical note that we 'wreckies' are all self-centered, morally bankrupt glory hunters, diving wrecks only for that souvenir Coke bottle, trophy photograph, commemorative T-shirt, or hardcore penetration bragging rights.

So I'll leave the final reflection to Rod Pearce, who's been searching for, and discovering, war wrecks in the waters around Papua New Guinea for the past 40 years.

"The letters are the hardest part," he says. "I still get letters from people looking for relatives missing in action. They want to know if I've found their father ... their grandfather."

It's a poignant reminder that there are people searching for wrecks for very different reasons. And for some, the passage of time has changed nothing. 🍀

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