

## Sea Stories at the NYC Explorers Club, 2016 !

Gary Lehman

In what has become an annual pilgrimage, members of the Scuba Sports Club in Westchester County, NY sojourned to Manhattan's venerable, iconic Explorers Club on November 12<sup>th</sup> for *Sea Stories 2016*. Sea Stories is an annual event, featuring a day of presentations on subjects related to human and marine interaction – including marine biology, archeology, marine environmental advocacy in many forms and manifestations, human maritime history, culture and commerce, and the peoples who live in or near the oceans and waters of this Earth. Past presentations have been diverse and captivating - which explains why the entire greater metropolitan diving community convenes each year at Sea Stories to be reunited and to be enriched anew by... well... Sea Stories! Our friend Michael, owner of Oceanblue was there; our friends Larry and Olga from NY Sea Gypsies were in attendance; TSSC's Allan had several friends from the Coney Island Aquarium (Wildlife Conservation Society) scuba dive team; Tom C. - another long-time fellow diver and friend of TSSC and leader for Boy Scout scuba diving in Westchester was in the Sea



Stories 2016 audience; and Marie L. (Women Divers Hall of Fame recipient and Executive Director of the NJ-based Shark Research Institute. And from The Scuba Sports Club the following were in attendance: Allan R., Gary L., Katelynn K., Bob B., Cindy F., Melissa L., Denise B., Vreni R., and Kenny S. were all together on this TSSC tour de force!

Past presentations have included a portrait of traditional peoples of Papua, New Guinea;

exploration of the Black Sea with incredibly preserved wrecks resulting from the anaerobic water; exploration of wrecks in the Mediterranean Sea; an exhibition of breathtaking underwater photography by Stephen Frink (<http://stephenfrink.com/about/>) whose work frequently appears in DAN's *Alert Diver* magazine (he is the publisher); viruses thriving in deep sea and deep fresh water environments; secrets of the sinking of *Titanic's* sister ship *Olympic*; migration patterns of whale and white sharks – and too many others to recount. This year, the presentations included exploration of historic wrecks in Lake Ontario; the marine advocacy and sea turtle rescue performed by the dedicated staff at the Bermuda Aquarium; the heroism of merchant marine sailors and the sinking of SS Pan Pennsylvania and U500 in April 1944 off the coast of Nantucket; artist Susan Casey discussed her three books; and finally, a presentation by Ocearch on the white shark nurseries discovered off Long Island/New Jersey. With a lineup of presentations like those, it is easy to see why Sea Stories is one of the annual events on the scuba diving community calendar!

The iconic Explorer Club building hosts most of the NYC



Explorers Club activities. The eclectic architectural 'mission revival' building (with a hint of Jacobean style) has handsome interior furnishings. The whole building and each of the five stories is brimming with artifacts and the spirit of exploration, adventure, American and human history, and is a paean to the human impulse to explore new worlds. The globe upon which

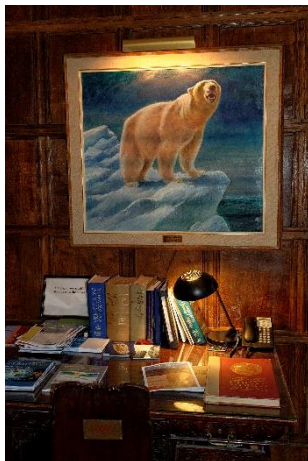


Thor Heyerdahl planned his trans-Pacific journey is on display, as is the menu from honorary dinners past - and the very same Explorers Club flag which was flown by Roy Chapman Andrews



on his Central Asian Expeditions in the 1920's to locate hominid fossils predating those found in Africa (he never did find those, but instead found many of the dinosaur bones currently on display in the American Museum of Natural History).

The objectives of exploration - by the definition of the Explorers Club - are right here – on, under and over the surface of our own planet. The Club's collection features artifacts, many of which individually



participated in the great age of exploration in the first decades of the 20th century. There are also many items from Teddy Roosevelt's private collection. The artifacts on display also include more recent memorabilia from deep sea exploration, mountaineering and the space program. The castle-like building on East 70<sup>th</sup> street was the home of Explorer Club member and journalist Lowell Thomas. Thomas was the first 'paparazzi' and created the genre of "news media superstar" (current examples being Geraldo Rivera, Mike Wallace, Anderson Cooper, Wolf Blitzer, Matt Lauer, Walter Cronkite, Barbara Walters, Katie Couric, and many others). Thomas was the individual who made T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) famous through his sensationalized reporting, and he was a prolific author, adventurer in his own right. (Of course, that was *long* before the days when he could don a buoyancy compensator device, regulator, air tanks, weight, fins and a face mask and swim with oceanic white tip sharks or sea turtles! Otherwise, *fair money that he would have!*)

This year's kickoff presentation was Jim Kennard, who discussed the use of his custom-designed side scanning sonar to locate (and then use unmanned submersibles to remotely explore) sunken historic vessels lost during 'the gales of November' in years past in Lake Ontario. These explorations yielded great detail about the life and times of the late-1700's which historically featured early Midwest exploration and settlement. These explored wrecks shed light on the local and early continental

commerce which accompanied this fascinating, transitional period of American history. Jim leveraged his experience as an electrical engineer to custom-design a side scan sonar system which he used to locate over 200 wrecks in the Great Lakes and the Finger Lakes over a span of 35 years. Finds included the British warship, 22-gun *HMS Ontario*, the oldest shipwreck ever found in the Great Lakes, as well as a rare 200-year old dagger-board schooner (an extinct form of trading vessel which were formerly used extensively for lake commercial traffic).

Dr. Ian Walker, curator of the Bermuda Aquarium and chief veterinarian of the fabulous Baltimore Aquarium, followed up with an interesting presentation about the life forms on and under the Sargasso Sea in the Bermuda Triangle. In his presentation, he described new discoveries around turtle migrations, and chronicled the trials and tribulations of one particular sea turtle in terrible distress from ocean plastics and netting. These plastics almost – but for the careful ministrations of the dedicated staff at the Bermuda Aquarium-- killed this turtle. The turtle was lucky to be rescued in time and nurtured back to health by Dr. Walker and his staff. Advanced medical technology intended for use on humans was employed in diagnosing exactly what ailed the turtle, swimming at a major list to starboard owing to internal deposits of plastics. And of course, the message is that plastics in the ocean's gyres are a grave threat to these pelagic regions which serve as incubators for much of the plankton which underlies the marine (and ultimately all terrestrial) food chain.

Next up were divers Joe Mazraani and Jennifer Sellitti who presented on the discovery and exploration of the German WWII U-boat (submarine) U550 and its victim via torpedo, American freighter SS Pan Pennsylvania. Both were discovered off Nantucket after extensive 'mowing the lawn' side scan sonar searching of the area around the reported coordinates of the attack in April 1944. The U-boat, after



*Merchant Marine Memorial, Battery Park NYC*

attacking and sinking Pan Penn, was itself attacked by three escorting US Navy destroyer escorts, whose depth charge attacks forced the submarine to surface, obliging surrender by the submarine's crew. (Sadly, most of the submarine sailors who abandoned ship off the submarine were lost at sea to hypothermia, due to the frigid April North Atlantic water; about one third of the sailors were interned for the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp in Ireland.) This story is covered in depth in a companion article appearing in the December issue of *Scuba and H2O Adventures* (and is available from the author Gary Lehman at [longbow@optonline.net](mailto:longbow@optonline.net)) from the standpoint of the Battle of the Atlantic; Jennifer took a slightly different angle on her presentation this day, discussing the shameful oversight of not granting post-war veterans' benefits to the Merchant Marine sailors who fought so hard against such great odds and at such tremendous sacrifice and loss of life against the

Axis forces. In fact, the loss rate of the Merchant Marine was *actually higher* than the US Army and Navy. Jennifer reported that the *death rate was 1 in 26 versus 1 in 114 for the US Navy!* It was not until

January 1988 -- almost forty years after the end of WWII, and too late for most merchant marine sailors who had by that time already left their last port of call -- that the Department of Defense finally recognized US merchant marine sailors as veterans, thereby granting veterans' benefits.

The next presentation offered a somewhat easier and more uplifting path for Sea Stories participants. Author Susan Casey presented three of her books respectively on 1) rogue waves through history and their impact from the standpoint of mariners, wave scientists... and surfers; 2) the life and times of white sharks in the Farallon Islands thirty miles west of San Francisco, and the call of the bleak but thriving biodiversity hotspot of the Farallons and 3) a sumptuous account of the emotional connectedness and personal restoration proffered to the author by dolphins, the 'other' intelligent life form on Earth -- and a passionate plea for protecting the threatened environment these beautiful, intelligent animals inhabit.

The final presentation for the day was given by Chris Fisher of Ocearch, a marine advocacy group whose pioneering work documenting white sharks is an important building block in the changing mindset towards these apex predators. Peter Benchley (of *Jaws* fame...) experienced transformed views of the white shark from a 'mindless killer' to a more accurate understanding of the species as a complex, nuanced and fundamental component of the marine environment. Similarly, Ocearch's work has helped change public perception about this species, and its vital role in maintaining equilibrium in the world's oceans. No longer is destruction of individual sharks universally celebrated; in some retrograde cases perhaps, these sharks are hunted as 'man eaters'; but increasingly and all over the world, perceptions are transforming to the benefit of this species and all which share the marine environment. Ocearch -- whose motto is 'educate, inspire, enable' participates in tagging individual white sharks, which enables us to begin to understand the complex lives these sharks lead. For example, one 16' 3500 lb. female white shark by the name of Mary Lee, was tagged in September 2012 and has since logged 34,000 miles (and counting!). (if you wish to follow Mary Lee, Ocearch invites you to do so by logging in to [http://www.ocearch.org/profile/mary\\_lee/](http://www.ocearch.org/profile/mary_lee/) Mary Lee's movement (like all tagged sharks) is determined by the radio frequency tag attached to the dorsal fin of the shark; when the shark's dorsal fin breaks the surface, the tag transmits its coordinates to the geosynchronous satellite and add the location to the database. Surely, without this kind of knowledge-building about this species, we will likely soon preside over the demise of this majestic apex predator. We congratulate Ocearch for their initiatives on behalf of the white shark; many of us will welcome the opportunity to support an individual shark and the shark and marine advocacy of Ocearch.

Concluding this review of *Sea Stories 2016*, we hope to meet up with you *next year* at the Explorers Club. Be sure to let me know if you are attending, because we can arrange a tour of the Club -- including the fascinating 'inner sanctum' - the Explorers Club attic !