

Anthony Tedeschi and NYC Sea Gypsies Present...

Where Divers Dare: The Hunt For The Last U-Boat

Gary Lehman



Anthony Tedeschi and Renata Rojas, President of NYC Sea Gypsies. Photo courtesy of NYCSG.

Dive News Network recently enjoyed a spellbinding evening attending the NYC Sea Gypsies scuba dive club October monthly meeting in the upstairs space at a Manhattan pub, at which diver (and *Andrea Doria* dive veteran) Anthony Tedeschi presented on the 2012 discovery and exploration of the WWII German U-boat (submarine) U550. The submarine rests upright on the bottom at 330' 70 miles south of Nantucket, and the team has dived on the submarine each summer since its discovery (although persistent bad weather in the summer of 2015 prevented diving the submarine).

Anthony also took us through the WWII Battle of the Atlantic, in order to place the German submarine into the context of this crucial struggle.

All told, it was a riveting evening and presentation based on the book

Where Divers Dare: The Hunt for the Last U-Boat (authored by Randall Peffer, Penguin Random House, 2016).

It should be noted that the submarine is stated to be “the last” diveable U-boat which will be discovered off the east coast of the United States. This seemed likely to be the case, since there are a limited number of U-boat wrecks on the East Coast continental shelf. Over time, these have been ‘discovered’ by fishing trawlers snagging *something* down there.... In the case of the U550, the dive team saw fishing nets draped over many parts of the submarine; the deck guns were missing, and it is assumed that these were snagged and dragged off the sunken wreck. However, in scuba we *never say never*; the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) started looking for another U-boat, U576 (sister ship to U550) in 2009, finally discovering it 35 miles off the North Carolina shore. It had been attacked and sunk in July 1942 with all hands -- who all remain aboard, on eternal patrol in their watery tomb.

As of the time, there has been no *absolutely positive* identification that the submarine Anthony and team have been diving on, is in fact U550; externally there is no identifying vessel numbering (sometimes crews painted the ship mascot or some visual moniker on the side of the conning tower; in some cases, these might still be visible). It would be astounding if this boat were not U550 though, given the circumstantial evidence. We know from Robert Kurson’s book *Shadow Divers* that U869 was positively and incontrovertibly identified by the spare parts locker in the motor room which had traceable serial numbers specific to U869 (this parts locker was common to all U-boats). Anthony and team would like to gain access to the same U-boat motor room on U550, in order to retrieve service/spare parts items with engraved serial numbers to prove - once and for all time - that this boat is U550. However, the interior of the submarine is a tangled, mangled mess of obstructions and upended equipment and resulting impossibly restricted access. There is no telling how stable (or *unstable*) the interior conditions are – so it is possible that this U-boat will rest for eternity without any positive identification.

A Great DECO Stop -- 'Hats Off' to NYC Sea Gypsies

In addition to this presentation brimming with fascinating history and *deep diving* ways and means (the wreck after all is in 330' of water), this dive club meeting also provided a forum for a hearty, welcome conclave of divers from all over the greater metropolitan NYC region. Boroughs and counties aplenty were represented, including (at minimum) Nassau, Suffolk, Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, Bronx, Westchester and Rockland! There were approximately 55-65 divers in attendance, collectively representing each and every scuba diving club in the region. It was great seeing and greeting familiar faces. Like a form of "fall homecoming" or "old home week". (I would almost recommend nametags. I take that back, I



NYC Sea Gypsies October Meeting -- 'Where Divers Dare'. Photo courtesy NYCSG

do recommend name tags.) The ties that bind all divers are evident in these convocations. It is great to have so many divers all gathered together in common cause talking about their favorite sport, rekindling friendships, sharing experiences, having a great time, and making plans for future dives together. It was both exciting and helpful hearing about diving exotic locations like Palau -- and closer sites such as Secret Beach on Long Island, Old Ponquogue Bridge, and some Long Island wrecks! It is always a positive experience to meet up with our local dive shops and service providers. NYC Sea Gypsies is one of the country's oldest and venerable scuba diving clubs, founded 45 years ago at the dawn of the sport. As a member of The Scuba Sports Club in Westchester, NY it was enjoyable meeting with fellow divers from the NYC Sea Gypsies. Our club and Sea Gypsies are



NYC Sea Gypsies Club Members at Beneath The Sea, 2016 and at Dutch Springs, 2015

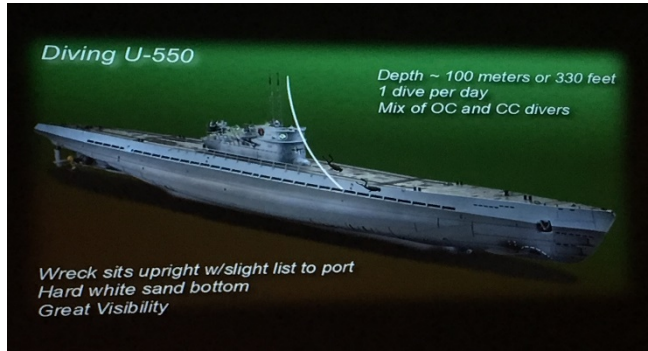


long-time neighbors with adjacent booths at the annual *Beneath The Sea* consumer dive show. This is all good for the sport; promoting collaboration and interaction among all local dive clubs, dive shops and hearing about northeast dive sites; it isn't just warm blue

water (although most of us *have nothing personally against that!*). Hats off to Renata Rojas, current President of NYC Sea Gypsies scuba diving club - and to all the club's leadership teams past and present - for running such a fine club. Together we are all building a stronger community of divers, drawing energy from all the clubs and dive shops in our area.

The Battle of the Atlantic and U550

Those with an interest in military history know that for the first six months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the Allies were in dire straits. Hitler declared war on the United States after Pearl Harbor, and we were in a world war (again...). German U-boats went on the attack, and were wreaking havoc on the trans-Atlantic convoys to England. This gravely jeopardized England's ability to stay in the fight against the Axis powers. England was being strangled by the U-boat blockade; however, the bulldog



English were also developing countermeasures to counter the U-boat menace, and shared those increasingly-proven effective defensive measures (most notably the use of convoys of cargo ships with destroyer and destroyer escort protection) with their American allies. But during early phase of the war, the American military high command apparently suffered from a case of 'not invented here' syndrome, in which the British tactical recommendations (based on their battle

experiences against U-boats) was ignored, because the recommendations did not emanate from the US Navy high command. These times were known as 'the happy times' for German submariners; the cities of the US east coast did not dim their lights; this facilitated deadly nighttime surface attacks by U-boats on individual US cargo ships, including many attacks right off the cities and seaside vacation spots. Soon the east coast was subject to dead American merchant marine sailors washing up on the beaches after close off-shore attacks, and horrified residents watched ships burning and blowing up night after night right off the beaches. Eventually the US Navy high command was obliged to adopt the British convoy escort system. The English broke the German naval encryption code (which revealed in realtime German HQ's operational/tactical plans), and the Allies turned to advanced technology (such as radar, aircraft with homing torpedoes, and ever-improving tactical methods) to defeat the U-boat. By mid-1943, the German submarine menace was largely under control. By the latter part of the war, these countermeasures were so effective that the German U-boat service suffered the highest mortality rate – 82% death rate – of any armed force unit in the history of modern warfare. Thus, by mid-1944 venturing out in U-boats was practically suicidal; nevertheless, the German submariners unflinchingly did their duty and a large majority died fighting for their cause.

Submarine U550 was dispatched from the German Baltic port of Kiel in the early part of 1944. Her mission: report on weather patterns to help predict Allied convoy traffic in advance of the anticipated Allied cross-channel attack from southern England to France against the German defenders. U550's first combat was a fight against a PBY Catalina, a long-range Allied reconnaissance bomber near Iceland on February 26, 1944. The aircraft detected the submarine and attacked while U550 was on the surface, killing two submarine crewmen. U550 did an emergency dive, but sustained damage from subsequent depth charging by the Allied bomber. The submarine survived. The next attack would not find U550 so lucky...

She was then assigned by Germany Navy high command to patrol the eastern coast of the US and attack targets of opportunity. This she did, against cargo tanker *SS Pan Pennsylvania* on April 16, 1944, which was torpedoed and split in half, with the stern sinking and the bow section remaining afloat. Three destroyer escort warships immediately engaged the submerged U-boat. However, even though submerged she was in grave danger, because the continental shelf restricted her depth to just over 300', and the U-boat had no thermoclines underneath which to hide (thermoclines deflect the sonar pulses called pings which are used by hunter-killer surface units to detect U-boats). The U-boat captain decided to lie silent on the bottom and hoped to not be detected. The boat would just wait out any attack - and hopefully be overlooked by the three searching destroyer escorts. Unfortunately for the crew and U550, that was not to be. The submarine was discovered and depth-charged repeatedly. The

hull was compromised, and sea water intruded through the damaged hull into the submarine. Sea water flooded the submarine's batteries, releasing chlorine gas inside the submarine which would have shortly killed all the sailors. It was reckoning time. The only alternative left to the submarine captain was to blow ballast seawater from the submarine's ballast tanks (similar in principal to inflating our BCD's), achieve positive buoyancy, surface, and either try to fight it out on the surface -- or surrender. Prussian military pride dictated the former. Witnesses aboard the pursuing destroyer escorts related that the submarine burst up out of the water like a breaching whale, then settled down on the surface. But the submarine could not fight the destroyer escorts because the torpedo tube hatches were damaged by the depth charge explosions. The surfaced submarine was extremely vulnerable, was rammed by one of the destroyer escorts, and peppered with 20mm, 40mm and 3" cannon fire from the destroyer escorts. The U-boat captain attempted to surrender the U-boat, but was wounded before the surrender flag could be hoisted. Eventually the submarine did successfully surrender with the crew abandoning the ship. An intrepid U-boat crewman (engineer Hugo Renzmann, interviewed a few years ago by the author and dive team) searched the submarine for any remaining German sailors still aboard. Finding none, Renzmann opened the sea cocks to scuttle the ship. He then escaped from the now-sinking submarine with the rest of the crew who were already in the water. In the aftermath of the action, some crew members tried to swim to the US destroyer escorts to be rescued but didn't make it, succumbing to hypothermia in the frigid April North Atlantic water. Others died in water before they could be rescued. (Different casualty numbers are reported in different sources, but around 40 crewmen died in the water, and 13 crewmen were rescued and interned in a prisoner of war camp in Ireland.)

Fast forward to 2011/2012: A dream took over local diver Joe Mazraani – find U550! The approximate location was known from after-action reports and coordinates logged for the attack; the search site was approximately forty square miles. Side scan sonar was used along with towed submersibles which are used to detect underwater objects. A tedious but disciplined 'mow the lawn' search procedure finally met with success on July 23, 2012! A submarine (presumably U550) was found in the general vicinity of the location of the battle between U550, her victim *SS Pan Pennsylvania*, and the escort destroyers. During the search for U550, a large submerged, unidentifiable structure of some kind was also discovered, which caused considerable excitement. (Subsequent analysis revealed it to be the stern section of the *SS Pan Pennsylvania*). Deep dives to document/map the wreck were made; some divers used Open Circuit and some Closed Circuit with considerable decompression obligations – diving operations were made on the submarine each summer, except for the summer of 2015 (owing to terrible weather on the available dive days).

The Human Connection

Adventures such as the discovery and diving the U550 are enriched by the human dimension. And that aspect is richly evident in this story. The dive team members met on several occasions with crewmen from the *Pennsylvania*, the destroyer escorts engaged in the attack, and the submarine sailors. A typical pattern was initial reluctance to discuss the incident or even the war, but that once started, the memories flowed. One vignette offered was that during a visit to Germany to meet with families of U550 sailors, the *Where Divers Dare* team met with Albert Nitsche and after a slow start, actually discussed wide-ranging topics including the attack for a full eight hours. Nitsche's family attended the session and were stunned to hear – for the very first time – the role that their father and grandfather

had played and the details of his experience. One can only think that Nitsche's opening up on his experiences -- on the edge of the final curtain call of his life- reflected a lifelong devotion to his crewmates, to all sailors under each of the combatants' flags, and a salute to all veterans of all wars who gave the fullest measure of their devotion to duty. Thus, this U550 dive was not just a 'dive' but a human journey and we are grateful to the *Where Divers Dare* team and all who assisted and participated in this endeavor. And, we wish them each and all success – and safe diving – for all their futures.

The 'hunt for READ October' is successfully achieved – subject book by Randall Peffer, *Where Divers Dare: The Hunt for the Last U-Boat* (Randall Peffer, Penguin Random House, 2016) is an absorbing read filled with history, drama, human connections, and richness of dive detail – especially for those of us who will never be privileged to plumb these extreme depths. Our author and the dive team take us there across time and space. All in all, an absorbing read about a tragic time of warfare at sea, and an uplifting and exciting evening in every respect. Thanks to all who organized it and to all the great divers who participated!