



“Recreational divers love Hatteras because of the sharks,” says *Under Pressure* captain, JT Barker. “But there’s a reason they call it the ‘Graveyard of the Atlantic’ — the weather, the seas, the current. It can all change in a minute. And the deeper you go, the more challenging it gets. But if I counted the 15 minutes I spend at 300 feet as the only reason to dive, it would never be worth it. It’s the adventure. It’s the camaraderie of the group. And meeting people who are as psychologically messed up as you are [laughs].” Photo: NOAA/CSI

“The first time I dove the U-701 with Uwe it was 90% covered in sand,” says Sommers. “The only thing sticking up was the gun, the conning tower and a bit of the stern. I never took a charter there all those years. Then [Hurricane] Isabel came through and scoured her out and blew away the sand. One day somebody drove over it and said, ‘Oh, a wreck.’ And that was the beginning of the end.”

It didn’t take long for the pillaging to begin. Only instead of retrieving dinnerware, someone sawed off the periscope. The resulting outcry drew a whole different species of diver: one whose very purpose wasn’t to keep wrecks secret, but to first study them and then broadcast every detail to the world.

“We had just completed our large-scale excavation of the [USS] *Monitor* in 2003 when that happened with the U-701,” says Joe Hoyt, Maritime Archeologist for NOAA’s Monitor Marine Sanctuary. “We were approached in conjunction with East Carolina University to see what the impact was on these U-boats and other sites. The more we looked into the resource, the more we realized there’s this amazing untold story.”

NOT ANYMORE. Enter the “Battle of the Atlantic” project. Since 2007, a team of researchers from NOAA, ECU and the Outer Banks’ own Coastal Studies Institute (CSI), has been working to document what exactly went down during those months of 1942. Gathering firsthand accounts of merchant marines. Filming and photographing wrecks from every angle. Even recruiting recreational divers to help with the research. It’s all part of a mission to record every facet of not just a rare period in North Carolina’s wartime past, but a confluence of world history that stretches from German bunkers in Normandy to Japanese battleships in Micronesia’s Chuuk Lagoon.

“The Battle of the Atlantic is part of a world war,” says ECU associate professor Nathan Richards, who serves as Program Head of Maritime Heritage for CSI. “You have this microcosm of American and international history sitting very close to the shore that is connected to other archaeological sites across the planet. People around the world will get more understanding as we reveal the potential of these wrecks.”

And NOAA’s sharing their findings like never before. From an online “maritime heritage trail” that lets you tour the coast, to audio recollections of coastal residents, to dive slates with diagrams and coordinates, to hours of the most high-resolution digital footage and photography ever captured. Last summer, a *National Geographic* docudrama called “Hitler’s Secret Attack on America” took a million viewers along with Hoyt as he and his team searched for the last missing German sub to sink off our coast: U-576.

This summer they’ll continue the search, filming every

second with technology that’s five times high-def. Part of it is purely academic — when you only get a few days to make a dive, you maximize the potential data for later study — but the visual impact is equally robust. Certainly more thrilling than any textbook.

“Here, put these on.”

Walking into the A/V room of CSI’s Wanchese headquarters, Interim Director of Education, Outreach & Communication John McCord hands me what looks like a pair of plastic aviator shades, sits me down in a chair and spins it toward a five-foot TV. The screen needs every pixel for what pops out next, as a six-foot sand tiger shark swims out from behind a giant, rusty, metal hull and straight into the room.

Beginning in summer, this 3D experience will head to the North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island where the average shmoe can experience the *E.M. Clark’s* awesomeness, without ever wearing a Scuba tank — or even a high-tech rebreather — in what McCord hopes

will be the first of many digital trips to Davey Jones’ locker. “Because, let’s be honest,” he says, “even most divers aren’t going to 250 feet.”

The problem? Some do. And they’re protective of their deep-sea stomping grounds. Especially when they feel like it’s being infringed upon.

“That video’s pretty, but it’s not going to bring me or Dave any business,” says *Under Pressure’s* captain, JT Barker. “I don’t trust anything the government says. The worst thing you can hear from the government is, ‘I’m here to help you.’”

All summer, Barker runs “six-pack” charters out of Hatteras. For \$155 he’ll take certified divers to the *Tarpon*. The *Proteus*. Pretty much anything inside the recreational limit of 130 feet. But those trips are just a way to fund a passion that triples that depth. Barker is aiming to dive every boat in the “Billy Mitchell” fleet: 11 of the most challenging wrecks off our coast, some of which lie 440 feet below the surface.

“Only one guy’s completed ‘em all,” Barker says. “Ken Clayton. I’m the next closest. And I’ve got two left — the *S-132* and the *Virginia*, both are at 390 feet.”

At these depths, one tiny mistake could mean death. Planning and completing a mission can take years. But what scares Barker more than not coming back up is not being able to get down.

“If NOAA decides to expand the Monitor sanctuary like they’re saying,” he worries, “I’ll probably be out of business inside of two years.” ▶

THEY FILM EVERY SECOND WITH HIGH-DEF TECHNOLOGY.