

## TRUTH IS, THESE WRECKS WERE NEVER

meant to be seen. During the war, the government made sure the explosions and smoke that were so visible off our isolated beaches never hit the newspapers. (“Loose lips sink ships” was more than a call for citizens to shut up, it was a mandate for media sources to maintain morale by hiding defeats.) After the war, the submerged hulks were seen as navigational hazards best avoided. If that wasn’t possible, they were dynamited, wire-dragged and hauled to deeper water where they could be forgotten.

But time adds value to all things. Baseball cards. Beer cans. Draw a stick figure today, it’ll be a Picasso in a thousand years. Take a hunk of military history, soak it in a swirling ocean for seven decades, and nature will twist and sculpt that chunk of battered metal into a breathtaking work of raw metal and eye-popping marine life.

“I took a young lady to the *Dixie Arrow* a couple of summers ago,” recalls *Lion’s Paw* captain David Sommers. “She said it was one of the most prolific dive sites she ever encountered in terms of sea life. And she was an aquarist at one of the big California aquariums. But it’s also the open Atlantic, so diving here can be challenging for less-experienced divers.”

In other words, this ain’t Club Med. Spin a globe and pick a famous dive destination, you’ll choose the Caribbean. Maybe Belize. Tropical locales where coral reefs and crystal clarity make for clear viewing and no current. In North Carolina, Morehead City’s the call, as calmer waters keep charter boats filled with freshly certified fans eager to see the U-352 — one of North Carolina’s three popular submarine dives. The two others — the U-85 and the U-701 — lie off the Outer Banks, where sketchy weather allows for maybe 50 trips a season, and the undersea climate brings other challenges.

“All the times I went out to the U-85, the average visibility was 10 to 12 feet,” says revered local diver Jim Bunch, who’s

devoted two books, four decades and 1,000 dives to his favorite sub, which lies 16 miles off Nags Head. “Every now and then you get a perfect day, but not that often. You have to really want to go.”

Conditions get warmer and clearer south of Hatteras, but currents can still be serious — the diving becomes more like mountain climbing, as you slowly pull your way down a line through the cool depths, holding on to the wrecks for dear life. And seas can turn sour any second. But these are also the hazards that earned the Outer Banks its title, “Graveyard of the Atlantic,” over 500 years ago, making for a marine environment

that boasts as much colorful history as it does varieties of fish.

“In the early years 95% of divers wanted artifacts,” says Bunch, who himself recovered the U-85’s “Enigma machine” — a German coding device that now lives in Cape Hatteras’ Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum. “It could be anything. Plates are popular because they have dates. And everything

the Germans made was stamped with a swastika — nuts, screws — so guys would grab it all. It had nothing to do with liking Nazis; they just wanted something to remember their dives by.”

In the days before GPS and the Internet, a community of competitive, diehard history buffs and diving nuts grew around finding these relics. Rogue researchers who spent years studying blueprints and charts to make sure they came back with the coolest stuff or — if possible — perhaps even the discovery of a new wreck. Once they scored something good, they kept it secret.

When U-Boat expert Uwe Lovas pinpointed the U-701 in 1989, he told almost no one. One jealous diver was so obsessed that he offered to pay \$10,000 for a trip out there. Nobody talked.

Until 2003, when a certain loose-lipped lady revealed the U-701’s location. ▶

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“Uwe Lovas was a very smart guy to be able to keep the U-701 so secret for so long” says U-boat expert Jim Bunch. “People would fly airplanes to look for him. Finally, around 2001 a friend said, ‘I think I know.’ So we went looking. I went down first. I saw two sharks, took a couple pictures, made another dive that afternoon and never went back [laughs].” Photo: NOAA/CSI