

Diving into history

Ben Green
Staff Writer

CPO2 Robert DeProy (left) and MS Nicholas LePage (right) hold the bell recently recovered off the sunken Brigadier General M.G. Zalinski. CPO2 DeProy was the sailor who found the bell and MS LePage helped haul it up.



Photo by Ben Green, Lookout

Descending into the cold, dark, Pacific waters is a daily routine for members of Fleet Diving Unit Pacific (FDU (P)). What awaits them is usually a snared propeller, a bruised hull, or in extreme circumstances, unexploded ammunition.

However, routine turned rarity recently when FDU (P) Clearance Divers played treasure hunter, returning a ship's bell to the surface for the first time in 65 years.

"Believe it or not, it was just sitting there upside down; you could see it was a bell," says CPO2 Robert DeProy, Mine Countermeasure (MCM) Chief Diver and discoverer of the artefact.

The bell belonged to the U.S. Army Transport ship Brigadier General M.G. Zalinski, which sank in Grenville Channel just off the east coast of Pitt Island in September 1946. The extremely narrow channel, about 80 kilometres south of Prince Rupert, is difficult to steer on the clearest of nights, but Zalinski's last voyage was marred by a downpour.

Departing from Seattle, the vessel was transporting cargo up the coast to Alaska. With no radar on board, the crew were bouncing sound signals off the nearby channel walls in order to navigate - it didn't work. Zalinski struck its port side, slicing open its hull, and sank. All 48 crew members managed to clamber into life rafts where they were picked up by a fishing vessel a few hours later.

With Grenville Channel being well over 300 feet deep, no recovery effort was made, and the vessel was thought to be lost for over six decades.

In 2003, the Canadian Coast Guard was alerted to an oil sheen on the west side of Grenville Channel. Upon an investigation, they determined the oil was leaking from a shipwreck 20 to 25 metres beneath the surface. With the oil leaking through the wreck's riveted hull, the Coast Guard eventually contracted a dive company to patch it up before they consulted with various government departments and First Nations groups about removing the remainder of the oil (the wreck is protected under the B.C. Heritage Conservation Act and now houses an abundance of marine life such as barnacles, sponges, and sea anemones).

During the patchwork, items suspiciously resembling general purpose aircraft bombs were discovered inside the wreck. While en route to Prince Rupert for Sea Festival last month, the 12-member FDU (P) dive crew was asked by retired Clearance Diver Tim Flath, on behalf of the DND UXO and Legacy Sites Program, to stop and take a closer look at the suspect items.

"They wanted positive confirmation they were in fact ordnance and not just bottles that looked like ordnance," says CPO2 DeProy.

From June 3 to 7, the dive crew used YDT Sooke as home-base while anchoring closer to the wreck in smaller crafts. After exploring the wreck, which had capsized and now rests with its keel towards the surface, they determined the items were indeed ordnance. As divers broadened their search, CPO2 DeProy squeezed into an opening and shined his light on pay-dirt.

"I've never recovered a bell off a ship; you read books about people who do this," he says. "It was once-in-a-lifetime to find the heart of the ship."

With the help of fellow divers, CPO2 DeProy attached a small lift bag to the bell hoping to float it to the surface. However, with the solid brass artefact weighing in excess of 60 pounds, they instead attached it to a line and pulled it to the surface.

"It had the name on it, that confirmed it was that boat," he says.

After receiving confirmation to keep the bell from the Archaeology Branch of Natural Resource Operations, FDU (P) is now waiting for the bell's paperwork so it can be cleaned and restored. Once restoration is complete, it will be displayed at the CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum in Naden.

Brigadier General M.G. Zalinski was originally commissioned as Lake Frohna in 1919 in the steel freighter class known as a "Laker." The recovered bell is inscribed with "Lake Frohna", dating it over 90 years old.