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Niagara Close-up: Dive Detective probe ghostly wrecks on the bottom of Lake Ontario

Diving into the Hamilton and Scourge



Darren Keyes, left, and Bob Clarke, from ASI Group Ltd., in St. Catharines with the submarine they used for a documentary about the War of 1812 warships Scourge and Hamilton resting in 90 metres of water in Lake Ontario off Port Dalhousie.

It was a dark, chaotic death for most of the men aboard the Scourge and Hamilton.

And a new documentary says it was likely a quick one.

A witness to the Aug. 13, 1813, sinkings off Port Dalhousie suggests it started with a violent nighttime squall.

The warships, weighted with men and cannons, foundered with the loss of at least 53 U.S. sailors. Last spring, film producers set out to learn more about the ill-fated vessels -- now an eerie gravesite at the bottom of Lake Ontario.

For the first time, a documentary crew with Yap Films peeked inside the bowels of these ghost ships.

Helping them with logistics like specialized sonar and remotely-operated submersibles was the St. Catharines company ASI Group Ltd.

What they learned may help explain the largest loss of life on the Great Lakes during the War of 1812. The result of their revealing investigation airs on History Television May 5 at 6 and 11 p.m. (A trailer clip of the documentary can be viewed at www.dive-detectives.com/trailers.php)

"We were just very interested in how they sank," said Elliott Halpern, executive producer with Toronto's Yap Films.

"And also the fact that so many men died so quickly, judged by the only eyewitness report.
"Because these ships are so iconic ... we thought this would be a really fascinating story to explore."

The resulting film, called *Warships Down*, is part of a series called *Dive Detectives* in which father-and-son diver/explorers Mike and Warren Fletcher try to unravel underwater mysteries.

In this case, an early theory is that heavy, relatively-open holds inside the ships would have quickly filled with water.

These fighting men suddenly found themselves in a noisy, swirling hell. Many were sleeping.

A great number were likely non-swimmers and had no chance.

Had there been sealed-off bulkheads, the sinking might have been slowed.

It's possible many more could have survived.

However, only 16 sailors made it to safety. One survivor was made famous by 19th-century author James Fenimore Cooper in the novel *Ned Myers: A Life Before the Mast*.

Cooper's description strongly suggests the ships went down in minutes from a violent, windy microburst. No record exists of an inquest afterward and the sinking hasn't been fully officially investigated.

The ships were discovered in 1973 in 90 metres of water by part-time marine archeologist Dr. Dan Nelson, St. Catharines, ON after more than a decade of searching.

The U.S. Navy later transferred ownership to the Royal Ontario Museum. The City of Hamilton acquired them from the museum in 1980.

Both vessels, located 10 kilometres off shore, are considered a war grave, a National Historic Site and are off-limits to divers.

Yap's latest effort to learn more about the vessels was done in partnership with the City of Hamilton and Parks Canada.

The team was led by parks archaeologists and technical specialists from ASI Group in St. Catharines.

There are no known surviving blueprints or plans for either vessel, so it wasn't clear exactly what the below-deck area of the structure would look like.

"And no one knew what changes or adaptations were made to those spaces when the merchant marine vessels were converted to military ones," Halpern said.

"We know the idea back then was to hold as much cargo as possible."

Darren Keyes is the Scourge and Hamilton project manager for ASI, which has done exploratory work on the ships for the past decade.

Using specialized sonar and video, ASI earlier pinpointed the wrecks and scanned their exteriors.

For last year's probe, ASI – a St. Catharines based company known worldwide for its water-related engineering services -- needed to provide a stationary platform on Lake Ontario that could be safely anchored away from the wreck site.

It used a remotely-operated vehicle the size of a shoebox and guided it into the ships' interiors.

Two centuries of accumulated silt meant the roving ROV and its high-definition camera was restricted to places with enough visibility and clearance.

"We got into both ships with limited penetration," said Keyes. " We wanted to get in and out without mishaps, damaging anything in the wreck or losing equipment."

The wood vessels themselves remain in excellent shape, except for an exterior mostly carpeted with quagga mussels.

The interior hull of The Hamilton, avoided by mussels who like currents of water to bring them food, was less infested.

As expected, the space inside was relatively open, a modification from commercial use to allow for more men, guns and supplies.

A rack of muskets was also discovered.

In the past, human remains have been sighted around the debris field, but they weren't visible this time.

It's suspected silt and shell may be covering up scattered bones and artifacts at the wrecks.

Simulations in Halifax, NS duplicating the conditions and open spaces inside the sinking ships were also compelling.

"We found that the water flowed in very quickly, a matter of seconds," said film director Jeff Vanderwal.

Warren Fletcher, who took part in the disaster simulation, experienced a nightmare scenario.

"For even an experienced commercial diver with scuba gear, it was a struggle for me to get out," said Fletcher. Fletcher was disoriented by the speed and pressure of inflowing water. He escaped with great effort.

"What YAP does extremely well is they tell a great story, and we appreciate that," said Mike McAllister, the co-ordinator of the Hamilton and Scourge project for the City of Hamilton.

"This is one set of interpretations they've come up with," McAllister added. "It may not be the interpretations we'll put forward ourselves, based on our analysis.

"But the nature of academic and museum work is to get discussion going ... it's a very healthy process."

In the meantime, the wrecks lie on a silty bed as a historic reminder of the perils of Great Lakes sailing.

In 2004, a radar surveillance system designed and built by a collaboration with ASI and Accipiter Radar Technologies Inc., Fonthill, ON was set up to monitor the site's usage.

The City of Hamilton also has a partnership with the Niagara Regional Police to help secure the area. Hamilton and Parks Canada will continue to explore the wrecks and set up long-term plans to protect and preserve the ships.

"As far as we're concerned, the condition of the ships and condition monitoring is key to the phase of this project right now," McAllister. "We're in a study phase."

Keyes said Niagara residents should appreciate these nautical artifacts in their watery backyard.

"There are no wrecks like these anywhere else in the Great Lakes," he said. "They're pristine.

"Yes, it is unfortunate mussels have covered them to this extent, but they're still very much intact. And it's great to have them so close to St. Catharines."

Background

- What:** In Aug. 8, 1813, the Hamilton and Scourge sink in a violent storm about 10 kilometres off Port Dalhousie.
- The tragedy:** At least 53 U.S. sailors die in the single largest loss of life in the Great Lakes in the War of 1812.
- The team:** Yap Films of Toronto, with logistical help from St. Catharines' ASI Group and in collaboration with Parks Canada and the City of Hamilton.
- Their quest:** New research and a documentary film Warships Down tries to solve the mystery of why so many perished.
- Warships Down:** a one-hour show, airs on History Television on May 5, at 6 and 11 p.m.
- On the web** Warships Down will be aired at a War of 1812 symposium in Hamilton on April 23-24.

For more information, visit: www.Discover1812.com

For more information about The Hamilton and Scourge National Historic Site, visit: www.hamiltonscourge.hamilton.ca/

See also the Parks Canada link at: www.pc.gc.ca/eng/progs/arch/proj/page8.aspx