

# British war grave shipwrecks are ransacked for scrap metal

Frank Pope Ocean Correspondent

Dutch salvage vessels are ransacking three sunken British warships, the final resting place of nearly 1500 sailors, in an illegal hunt for valuable scrap metal that has triggered outrage among Britain's naval community.

Police in the Netherlands were preparing yesterday to stop the looters, who are using heavy-duty claws on cranes to tear through the remains of the cruisers, which were sunk 22 miles off the Dutch coast in a crucial battle at the start of the First World War.

The Ministry of Defence and the Dutch Cultural Agency condemned the disturbance of the important war grave. Vice-Admiral John McAnally, the president of the Royal Naval Association, urged the metal hunt to stop. "Leave our sailors alone," he said. "Let them rest in peace."

On September 22, 1914, the Royal Navy ships were on patrol off the Dutch coast when they ran into a lone German submarine.

The U9 struck HMS *Aboukir* with a torpedo at 6.20am and submerged. The captains of the other two vessels rushed to assist. As HMS *Hogue* was rescuing men from *Aboukir*, she was struck by two torpedoes. HMS *Cressy* fired on the German submarine and tried to ram her, but could not evade the torpedoes.

In just over an hour the terrible threat posed by U-boats became clear to the Royal Navy and to senior German naval officers who had previously been sceptical of their usefulness. Dutch and British ships eventually rescued 837 men but 1,459 died.

Local dive operators raised the alarm about the illegal salvage after seeing the damage to one of the North Sea's most popular diving sites. Along with maritime historians and marine conservationists, they protested to the Dutch Government and warned the British in



A German report of the U-boat attack

a letter to the Ambassador to the Netherlands.

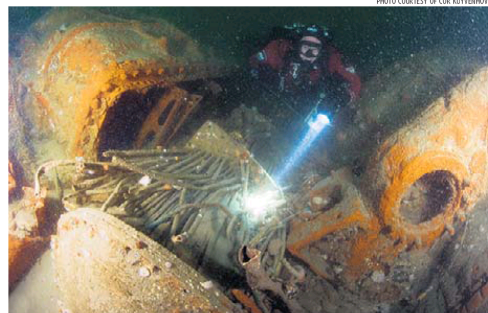
A Dutch coastguard aircraft confirmed that salvage vessels were on the site and police found pieces of wreckage on board, but they have been unable to halt the destruction. Two ships based in the port of Scheveningen, the MS *Bernica* and MS *Bela*, are alleged to be raiding the wrecks.

The Ministry of Defence said: "We do not condone the unauthorised disturbance of any wreck containing human remains." Efforts were being made with the Dutch authorities to prevent "inappropriate activity" at the sites, a spokesman said.

Ben Stiefelagen, a local dive charter

operator, said: "After 97 years on the bottom, the wrecks are beautiful dive sites full of marine life, but the remains of hundreds of sailors are in each of the wrecks. They are historic sites, visited by over a thousand divers a year."

The price of copper and bronze has made salvage profitable. "We're not talking about souvenir hunting, we're talking about organised, large-scale salvage," said Martijn Manders of the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency.



The wreck of the British destroyer The Scott has also been targeted by looters

## Treasure trove of silver could net salvage company £130m

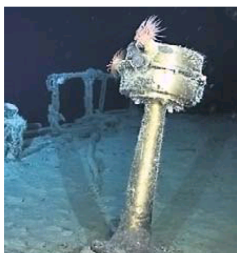
Giles Whittell Washington

Lying deeper than the *Titanic* and laden with more than 200 tonnes of silver, the wreck of a British Second World War merchant ship has been found by a Florida company that could earn nearly \$200 million (£130 million) from the sale of its treasure.

The broken hull of the SS *Gairsoppa* was found 300 miles (480km) off the coast of Ireland under nearly three miles of water in the Atlantic by American salvage experts who plan to return next spring to raise its cargo of bullion to the surface. When they do, they will revive memories of one of the more astonishing survival stories of the war.

The *Gairsoppa*, a 5,237-tonne steamer with 85 men on board, was nearing the end of a two-month voyage from Calcutta to Liverpool when disaster struck. Running short of coal, she left her protective convoy and headed for Ireland to refuel. A German U-boat was alerted to her position and on February 17, 1941, the *Gairsoppa* was torpedoed. She sank within 20 minutes.

Only one of the ship's three lifeboats reached land. It took on about thirty men but after 13 days at sea only six were still alive. When the boat approached Caerthillian Cove on the southern Cornish coast in treacherous conditions, it was spotted by three girls



The SS Gairsoppa's stern compass, some 4,700m under the Atlantic

who alerted the coastguard. All but one of the survivors drowned when the lifeboat capsized, but help came in time for Second Officer Richard Ayres, the only survivor. He died in Cornwall in 1992.

The *Gairsoppa*'s cargo on its final voyage was described by its owner, the British-India Steam Navigation Company, as consisting mainly of pig iron. In fact it was carrying an estimated 240 tonnes of silver in coin and bars.

Odyssey Marine Exploration of Tampa, Florida, will keep 80 per cent of anything recovered, with 20 per cent going to the British taxpayer.



During 2012 our lovely little  will become Fairtrade certified so they will not only taste good but do good too.



Raising The Bar

www.mars.co.uk/raisingthebar

Mars is a registered trademark. © Mars 2011