

*The Shipwreck Hunter: A lifetime of extraordinary discoveries on the ocean floor* by David L. Mearns

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David Mearns will be well known to many readers as a shipwreck hunter with a very successful track record going back over three decades. *The Shipwreck Hunter* is an autobiographical account of Mearns' fascinating life which focuses primarily on his work on just nine of his most famous shipwreck discoveries and investigations.

After some preliminaries about his early life, the book really gets underway with Mearns' description of the case of the shipwreck *Lacuna* and the multi-million dollar fraud behind its loss and the deaths of its 6 crew. The wreck was located and the visible damage caused by a 200kg time bomb was enough evidence to imprison the culprits. This is a fascinating tale with which most readers will be unfamiliar.

The next case described in detail is the sorry loss and Mearns' discovery of the bulk carrier *Derbyshire*. The ship had disappeared in 1980 off Japan with 44 on board. Mearns describes how it was located. I found his descriptions of the use of deep locating sonar technology in operation particularly interesting. The legal and technical aspects of this case rumbled on for years but did lead to a number of important reforms to the regulations which have reduced the losses of this type of ship. For this reason Mearns considers this case to be his most significant find. I would not disagree. The laying of a plaque on the wreck to commemorate those that died was a nice touch.

Two chapters are also given over to the retelling of the location and surveys of HMS *Hood* and KTB *Bismarck* and also HMAS *Sydney* and HSK *Kormoran*. Both of these fascinating tales have been told in detail in Mearns' earlier books detailing each project. *The Search for the Sydney* will always rank among my favourite all time books. For those unfamiliar with these stories, *The Shipwreck Hunter* gives a good account of each and offers updates not in the original books, not least the telling of the recovery of *Hood's* bell in which I played a very minor part. A highlight for me from these landmark cases was the way in which the investigation into *Sydney* and *Kormoran* validated the accounts given by *Kormoran's* survivors of how what should have been an uneven fight turned out very differently. It is a very powerful example of shipwreck investigations can offer conclusive proof in the sometimes vague and conflicting world of the history of naval conflict.

The *Sydney* discovery led indirectly to a search and discovery of the hospital ship *Centaur*, cruelly sunk by a Japanese submarine while clearly illuminated. This case will be new to most readers and is notable for the challenges faced and the identification of the wreck beyond doubt by the filming of the ship's bell with its name clearly visible. Another WW2 shipwreck, the ill-fated liner *Athenia* and its seeming discovery by multibeam sonar in conjunction with the BBC gets a retelling as well.

The final shipwreck described in detail is the Portuguese ship *Esmerelda* wrecked off Oman in 1503. This project has now gone well beyond discovery and survey and has been partially excavated and written up as peer-reviewed work which is ongoing. Much of this was coordinated with

Bournemouth University, where I work. Although not involved I am happy claim that I did connect Mearns to us and am equally happy to see the project succeed in the way that it has.

Buried in the pages of each chapter are innumerable references to other projects. I would really have liked to have read more about some of these but confidentiality is clearly being observed in relation to some client work. Not least private and government salvage enterprises. Throughout the book Mearns is clear that his business is a stressful one. Any failure could be career-ending and in every case, there is no guarantee of success. It takes a particular type of singlemindedness to survive and thrive in what can be a very competitive environment. It is testament to thorough planning, luck and no small amount of determination that Mearns has become the most successful high-profile shipwreck-hunter of his generation.

From student of marine biology to shipwreck hunter and surveyor to peer-reviewed academic, Mearns has certainly had a very interesting career path. He clearly feels that it isn't over yet as he details his ambitions to find other iconic shipwrecks in the future. Even readers with only a passing interest in shipwreck exploration will find this a fascinating and inspiring book which I have no hesitation in recommending.

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