

Wreck discovery came despite a million-dollar mishap

Centaur gives up secrets

FINDING and filming the *Centaur* wreck involved a level of technology worthy of a Tom Clancy novel – and a very healthy dose of good luck.

Under the water, scientists and researchers used the latest sidescan sonar to pick up the vague shape of the hospital ship lying on the ocean floor.

Above the water in the research vessel, *Seahorse Spirit*, pinpoint GPS navigation systems tracked and recorded every move, while state-of-the-art computer modelling fleshed out the raw data being fed from the bottom.

As the wreck hunters studied maps, digital readouts and computers, history came alive.

But there was a cost. Early in the search, a million-dollar broad sonar array being towed behind *Seahorse Spirit* suffered a mechanical failure and plummeted into the abyssal depths. After 12 hours of searching for it with no luck, a new, more sensitive sonar was deployed.

On the ninth day of the search, December 20 last year, search director David Mearns reported finding an image he believed was ‘without doubt’ that of the *Centaur*, 48km east of the southern tip of Moreton Island at a depth of 2059 metres.

The wreck was in a narrow gully just 150m wide and 90m deep.

“The *Centaur* lies in one piece on the lower flank of a narrow gully ... and is bounded by steep walls on either side – one with a slope of roughly 45 degrees,” he wrote in his blog.

He said the sonar towfish was at the end of a 6000m cable and

getting it next to the wreck was like ‘threading a needle ... a very difficult task’.

Mr Mearns and his team returned to the site this week and a robot submarine named Remora 3 descended more than 2000m to take the first underwater footage at 2.50am (AEST) on Sunday.

Early on Monday, Mr Mearns and his crew of 33 began taking a second lot of haunting pictures of the wreck during a mission that lasted about nine hours.

The footage included the ship’s bell and a well-documented escape hatch that survivor Martin Pash climbed through moments before the ship sank.

“We found the bell with the name on it. You can’t get any better than that,” said Mr Mearns.

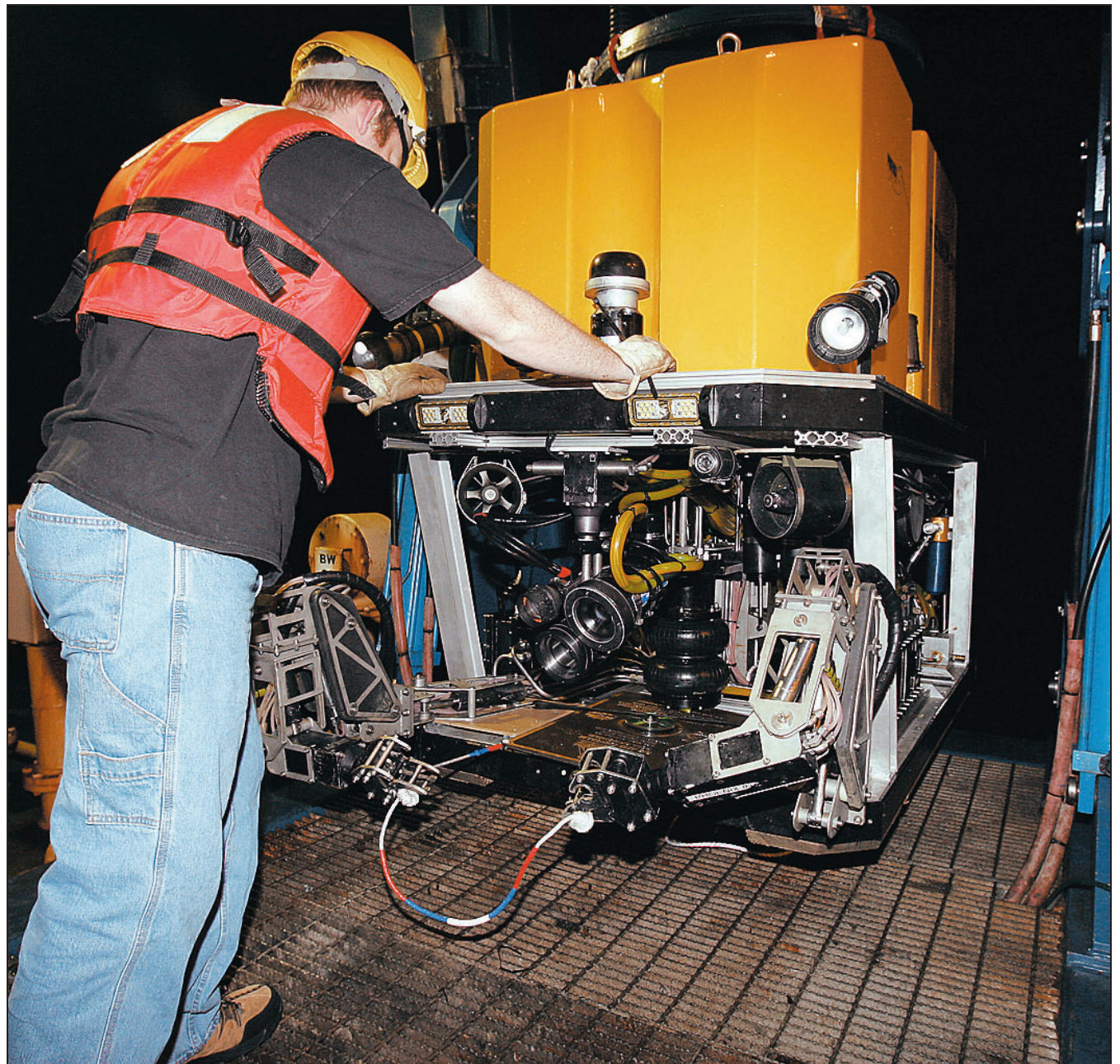
He said the five hours spent on the wreck on Monday morning was an improvement from the first hour-and-a-half on Sunday night.

“The visibility has been better and the video footage has improved,” he said.

The crew also got a closer look at where the ship was hit by the torpedo, their preliminary conclusion that it was hit on the port (left) side just forward of the bridge.

The mission was blessed with a half knot current on Monday morning, something Mr Mearns described as ‘incredibly rare’.

It was for this reason, he said, that he decided to delay the laying of the memorial plaque until the fourth mission early yesterday. All *Centaur* footage was shot more than one metre away as it is protected under the Commonwealth’s Historic Shipwrecks Act.



A crew member prepares the ROV submersible with the *Centaur* memorial plaque to leave the *Seahorse Spirit*



Project manager David Mearns (right) and Queensland Museum shipwreck officer Ed Slaughter discuss the laying of the plaque



Mr Mearns compares photos with live underwater images

Memorial service held for the 268 who were sent to their deaths

by David Barbeler

A MEMORIAL service honouring the lives of 268 Australians who died on board the torpedoed hospital ship *Centaur* has been held 2059m directly above the watery tomb.

The *Centaur* ceremony took place at 12.45pm yesterday, almost seven hours after the Remora 3 submarine robot laid a plaque on the bow foredeck of the wreck, in what could be the last ever visit to the site.

The *Centaur* was sunk by a Japanese submarine off the Queensland coast in 1943.

With only 64 of the 332 people on board surviving, it was the highest casualty list of any merchant ship sunk in the Pacific in World War II.

The ship was lost for 67 years until shipwreck hunter David Mearns and his crew of 33 onboard the *Seahorse Spirit* sent a submarine robot named Remora 3 down on Sunday to take the first confirmation footage of the wreck.

Marine historian Captain John Foley, at yesterday’s ceremony, said that while the nation was at war, the *Centaur* should have had no reason to fear being attacked.

“Of the 332 men and women on board, only 10 needed to be awake ... the rest would be off duty and resting, if not asleep,” said Capt Foley, the co-author of the book, *Australian Hospital Ship Centaur – The Myth of Immunity*.

“When the torpedo struck, its charge exploded, and then the bunkers exploded.”

Capt Foley said everyone sleeping in the forward hospital wards would have died almost instantly.

“Those who did manage to jump clear of the shattered ship were showered by burning drops of oil,” he said.

“Many died of exposure to the sea, of burns, or injuries, or shark attacks.”

Capt Foley said that whatever went through the Japanese submarine commander’s mind at the time, there could

be no doubt he knew what he was doing.

“*Centaur* was brightly lit, her white hull emblazoned with a broad green banner and several red crosses that proclaimed her as a vessel of mercy,” he said.

“This was a measured attack. It took some time to set up the approach, to line up in readiness and to launch the torpedo.”

After a prayer and a moment’s silence the memorial wreath was then laid in the ocean by Army Major Arthur Dugdale.

Weights on the wreath allowed it to sink to the depths of the wreck.

The service ends the *Centaur* mission, which has seen Mr Mearns and his crew capture about 24 hours of video and photographic evidence of the wreck.

During the expeditions, Mr Mearns and the crew identified several of the ship’s ‘fingerprints’, including a bright red cross, a bell with the ship’s name on it, a distinctive star on the bow, and a corroded identification number 47.



The plaque which was placed on the *Centaur*’s deck yesterday before the memorial service