

Shipwreck hunter reveals Centaur fate



DIFFICULT TASK: David Mearns confirming the location of the Centaur wreck.

Picture: Bruce Long

Oil tank blast signalled end

Tuck Thompson

THE explosion of an oil tank following the torpedoing of the AHS Centaur probably sealed the fate of the wartime hospital ship, which speared into the seabed at up to 40km/h, shipwreck hunter David L. Mearns revealed yesterday.

The Centaur sank 50km off the southern tip of Moreton Island after the Japanese submarine I-177 attacked the brightly-lit ship in 1943.

In a briefing yesterday, Mr Mearns acknowledged the difficulty of finding the wreck at a depth of two kilometres using a side-scan sonar, an operation he likened to "Han Solo in Star Wars".

Steep terrain reduced his chances of finding the wreck - even using what proved to be an accurate position from the ship's navigator - from 90 per cent to as little as 60 per cent.

Significantly, no munitions were discovered on the Centaur or in its debris field. Some reports since the sinking hinted it was attacked because it was secretly carrying arms.

Mr Mearns said "a whole body of

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evidence" pointed to a torpedo strike which triggered a massive secondary explosion in the oil tank, sending the Centaur down in minutes. It settled on its side in a gully, coming to rest on a 45 degree angle.

Searchers took 1400 photos and 24 hours of video during several days of filming at the wreck site, which now has a 200ha protection zone around it banning anyone entering without a Commonwealth permit.

A bronze plaque donated by the Centaur Association, with a CD containing personal messages from family members of the victims, was placed on the Centaur's bow on a

strong section of the deck near number-one hatch.

Remarkably, the ship's bell was found upright and lodged between two ventilator pipes. The name Centaur was clearly visible on it.

Mr Mearns said it was fortunate the search was made while the ship's distinctive paintwork, including red crosses, a green stripe and identification number, were still visible.

"In maybe 20 years that red cross may not have been seen," he said.

Mr Mearns praised the late Gordon Rippon, the ship's navigator, for providing bearings which allowed the Centaur to be found less than two kilometres from where he judged it had sunk.

Searchers never found the Centaur's lifeboats but did find hundreds of pieces of equipment and other items, including hospital beds with springs, a life ring, an emergency steering wheel and two hats.

A public Centaur memorial service will be held at a yet-to-be-named Brisbane church in February or early March. Relatives of victims will be invited to a memorial at the wreck site, probably sometime after May.

Charges over grave havoc

TWO teenagers have been charged over the destruction of more than a dozen historic tombstones at one of Queensland's oldest cemeteries.

A 15-year-old girl and a 16-year-old boy have been accused of destroying 19 headstones and burial plots at the Goodna Cemetery, southwest of Brisbane, on December 16 and 17.

Damage is estimated to be worth about \$50,000.

Some of the tombstones dated back to 1898, and a 1922 life-size memorial of an angel was smashed beyond repair.

Police confirmed the teenagers have been charged with wilful damage and will be dealt with under the Juvenile Justice Act.

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