

Notes

- 1 During the 2008 field season the bay of Porto Polermo and its entrance was completed.
- 2 Multibeam data was acquired through Kongsberg's SIS software, processed in CARIS HIPS/SIPS, and modeled in IVS Fledermaus software for anomaly analysis. All acquisition and processing of data was performed by surveyors contracted from Highland Geo Solutions Inc. of Fredericton, NB, Canada.
- 3 IVS kindly provided a prototype software module that allowed the tracking of all vessels within the 3-D models of the seafloor in Fledermaus.
- 4 Although it is not clear from the evidence if this was the scuttled Austro-Hungarian submarine U-72, the German U-24, or whether a British submarine (possibly the H2) that was also lost in the area.
- 5 Not only were modern war craft a common find, but a spent missile was also found in target confirmation. There have been many tons of munitions from the various 20th-century conflicts removed from Montenegro's waters by the RDMC; however, all of the finds discussed here were at depths over 60 m.
- 6 The heavy concentration of Roman and Late Roman-era amphoras littering the seafloor, some of which are intrusive on Archaic-Hellenist Greek wreck sites, probably led to confusion.
- 7 Lindhagen 2009.
- 8 If it did recede under the water due to sea-level rise and possible subduction, then heavy sedimentation has long covered any remains; some of Risan's ancient remains are reported to have been build over when the new dock at Risan was completed.
- 9 Delgado 2009.



James P. Delgado INA

Jeffery Royal RPM Nautical Foundation

Adrian Anastasi University of Tirana

Revisiting and Early Naval Incident of the Cold War: Archaeological Identification of the Bow of HMS *Volage* Sunk During the Corfu Channel Incident of October 22, 1946

HMS *Volage*, from Pingbosun, Destroyers Second Album, Picasa.



Volage, in harbor, showing bow damage, from Pingbosun. Destroyers Second Album, Picasa.

Introduction

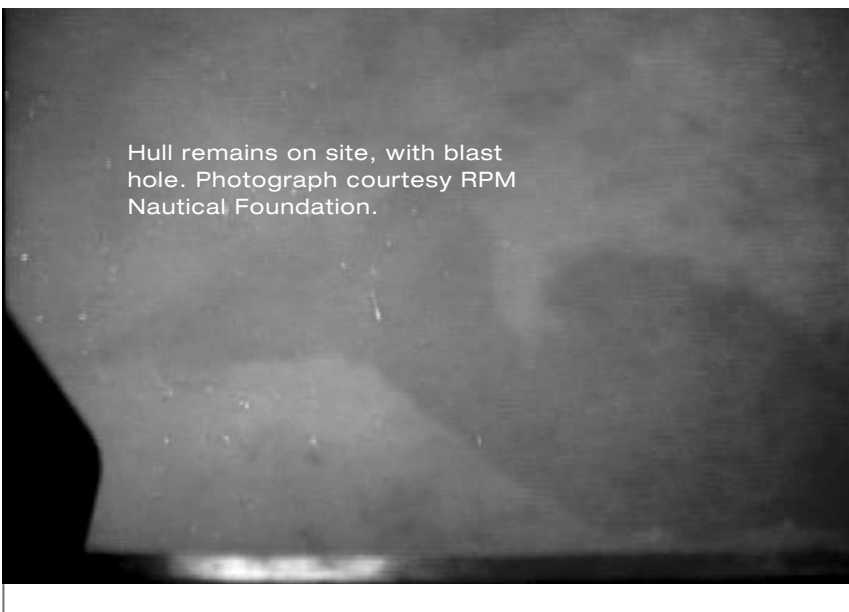
Following the Second World War, Britain asserted that the Corfu Channel, a narrow seaway separating the island of Corfu from the Albanian coast, was an international strait. Albania, at that time a Communist State under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, came into conflict with Britain over the right of passage. Three separate incidents ensued in 1946. Britain claimed free transit through an international waterway, citing the doctrine of innocent passage, and Albania

claimed that in all three incidents the passage was anything but innocent and that Albanian sovereignty had been violated. Following the last two incidents, one of which involved loss of life, the two nations agreed to settle the matter in international court. In a now famous legal decision, the Corfu Channel Case, the court found for Britain, but acknowledged that in the third incident Albanian sovereignty had been violated.

The court decision did not resolve the matter to the satisfaction of either party. Britain and Albania severed diplomatic relations, and did not resume them until 1991. The incident remains controversial to this day, with unresolved questions. A comprehensive archaeological survey of Albania's coastal waters by the RPM Nautical Foundation, Inc., encountered the remains of what was identified as a modern shipwreck 1.5 kilometers off Saranda in Saranda Bay in 2007. At the request of the senior author in 2009, during survey operations in the vicinity, the "modern wreck" target was revisited and examined with an ROV. The archaeological evidence suggests that the target represents the remains of the bow of HMS *Volage*, blown off by mines during the Corfu Channel Incident of October 22, 1946. Additional survey and study of the target is recommended, particularly as the survey encountered what may be human remains.

Historical Background

The straits that separate the island of Corfu from the mainland are a narrow channel approximately three nautical miles across that widens past the town of Kassiopi on the northeastern end of Corfu. The channel or strait has been used for millennia as a route for ships entering the Adriatic from the Ionian Sea and conversely ships leaving the Adriatic. The international boundary between Albania and Greece is defined as the middle of the channel



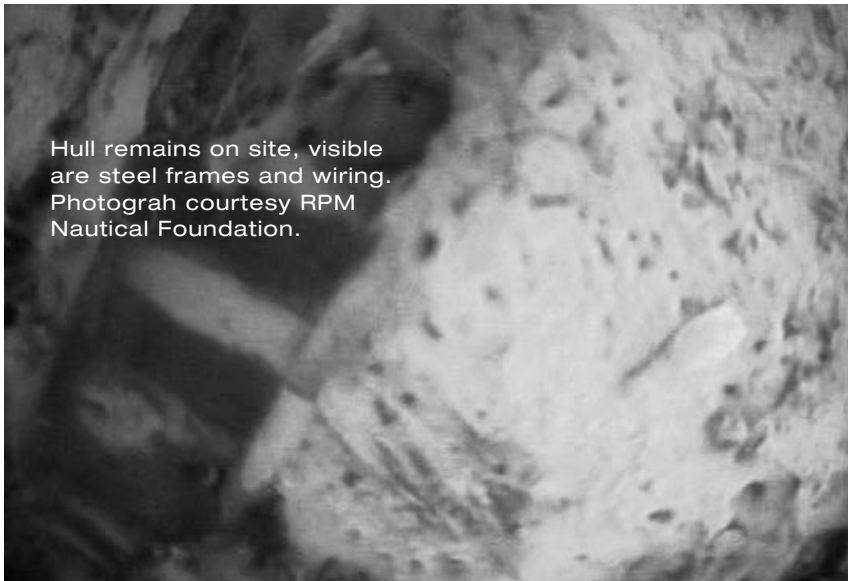
Hull remains on site, with blast hole. Photograph courtesy RPM Nautical Foundation.

(approximately 1.5 nautical miles off each coast) on navigational charts. As a key transit point between two oceans, the Corfu Channel became a strategic choke point during the Second World War, when the straits were mined by the Axis. In 1944 and 1945, British minesweepers cleared the channel to reopen the straits. The Royal Navy maintained a fleet anchorage off Corfu Town, and viewed the channel as "an international highway." This view and British naval activities in the area led to conflict and eventually the near-loss of two British warships and the death of 44 British seamen.

This event, known as the "Corfu Channel Incident," occurred during a time one historian has termed the "confused aftermath of World War Two, when Britain was attempting to re-establish its status as a major maritime power and undertake its duties in the Mediterranean," which included mine clearance and reopening the Corfu Channel to international traffic as well for its own warships.¹ Britain operated on the legal principle that the channel was an international passage, and its navy was "reaffirming customary law."² Albania, however, viewed the straits as a sensitive area vital to the "security of the country and its recent hard won independence."³

Enver Hoxha, the Communist leader of Albania, was "highly suspicious of his Greek neighbors" because of years of conflict over the boundaries of Greece and southern Albania, including open warfare after 1940. The end of the Second World War did not alleviate Hoxha's concerns, and Albania was "at a high state of alert and coastal batteries overlooking the Corfu Channel were constantly manned because Greek ships, including warships, frequently approached close to the Albanian shore of the channel."⁴ As one historian has noted, this may have been because the median line and the international channel are not ideal for larger vessels due to the "shallow, rocky, and shelving nature of the seabed on the Corfiot side" and as a result "ships using this route were forced to navigate within a mile of the Albanian coast."⁵

Whether the British view and subsequent actions were provocative or not is essentially a moot point. Hoxha and by extension Albania considered it provocative and acted accordingly. In addition to the issues between Albania and Greece, and Britain's acknowledged friendship with Greece, the tensions between the United Kingdom and Albania were part of an escalating series of encounters between various Communist states and non-Communist states that began in late



Hull remains on site, visible are steel frames and wiring. Photograph courtesy RPM Nautical Foundation.

1945 and continued over the next four decades as part of the “Cold War.”

Following elections in December 1945 which gave Enver Hoxha and his party a mandate to form a government, Hoxha created a Communist monopoly and began to take an increasing number of anti-western actions. In February, 1946, the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of his party, the CPA, decided that “Britain and the U.S. represented the main danger to national [Albania’s] independence”.⁶ Accusations of espionage and economic sabotage and a trial of pro-western Albanian parliamentarians led to a British withdrawal of its military mission in April 1946, and cancellation of an exchange of diplomats.⁷

On May 15, 1946, two Royal Navy cruisers, HMS *Orion* and HMS *Superb*, the first British warships to use the Channel since the end of the war, entered the northern end and steamed south off the Bay of Saranda toward Corfu, where they planned to anchor. As they passed close by the coast, several shots were fired with high explosive shells. The cruisers picked up speed and the shots fell astern.⁸ No hits were scored, and the cruisers did not return fire, but Britain demanded an official apology, which was not granted. Hoxha claimed that his shore batteries had defended Albania from a planned British landing.⁹ As one historian has noted, “despite an understandable degree of determination by a small nation that felt under threat from more powerful neighbours to defend itself, what was at stake was the balance between sovereign rights and the freedom of navigation through the waters in the Corfu Channel”.¹⁰

Britain then decided to assert, through a larger naval presence, that they had the right to transit the channel. As Thomson (2005), notes, the Albanian response to Britain contested that assertion, and “perhaps, understandably, the Admiralty had taken umbrage” (150). A dispatch was sent to the Commander-in-Chief, Corfu:

The establishment of diplomatic relations with Albania is again under consideration by H.M. Government who wish to know whether the Albanian Government have learned to behave themselves. Information is requested whether any ships under your command have passed through the North Corfu Strait since August, and, if not, whether you intend them to do so shortly.¹¹

While no specific instructions were given by the Admiralty to the C-I-C,, the intent “was clear enough,” and the C-I-C decided to route four of his ships through the channel to “make a diplomatic and legal point”.¹² The vessels were the cruisers HMS *Mauritius* and HMS *Leander*, accompanied by the destroyers HMS *Saumarez* and HMS *Volage*. The four vessel force entered the “North Corfu Channel” on October 22, 1946. HMS *Saumarez*, and subsequently HMS *Volage* (while attempting to tow *Saumarez*) struck mines which seriously damaged both vessels and killed 44 of their crew, wounding 42 others.

Britain protested and announced that it was sending more of its ships into Albanian waters to clear them of mines, which it did on November 12 and 13. The UK submitted the matter to the United Nations Security Council for adjudication. The key arguments were Britain’s assertion of their warships’ presence off the Albanian coast as an “exercise of the right of innocent passage,” and the argument that Albania had laid the mines or had cause to know of the mines being laid by a third party and thus were in violation of international law and liable. Albania’s claim at the time of adjudication was that “It has not been proved that the mines which caused the accidents of October 22nd, 1946, were laid by Albania,” it “has not been proved that these mines were laid by a third Power on behalf of Albania,” that it “has not been proved that these mines were laid with the help or acquiescence of Albania,” and that “it has not been proved that Albania knew, before the incidents of October 22nd, 1946, that these mines were in her territorial waters.” Albania also contended that the U.K. “violated the sovereignty of the Albanian People’s Republic by reason of the acts of the Royal Navy in Albanian waters on the 22nd October and on the 12th and 13th November 1946,”

and that Albania, as a “coastal State is entitled, in exceptional circumstances, to regulate the passage of foreign warships through its territorial waters. This rule is applicable to the North Corfu Channel.”¹³

The matter ultimately was submitted to the International Court of Justice at the Hague, and resulted in nearly three years of proceedings which ultimately were decided in Britain’s favor, although the Court ruled that Albanian sovereignty had been violated in the mine clearance action of November, when the sweeping came as close as 300 yards offshore.¹⁴ Albania was ordered to pay £875,000 in restitution to the United Kingdom, which it refused to do. Britain then froze Albanian gold assets held in London. Diplomatic relations between the two nations were not normalized until 1991, with the “Corfu Channel Incident” remaining a matter of disagreement.

HMS *Saumarez* and HMS *Volage*

Both of the ships damaged with loss of life during the Corfu Channel Incident were destroyers with distinguished careers and battle honors. They were the product of a wartime build-up of British destroyers, specifically of the “utility type” in which “essential war requirements took precedence over all other considerations,” namely they were utilitarian, no-frills vessels.¹⁵ HMS *Saumarez*, an “S” class destroyer, was laid down at the Hawthorn Leslie yard, Hebburn, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Launched on November 20, 1942, *Saumarez* was commissioned on July 1, 1943. HMS *Volage*, a “V” class destroyer, was laid down at the yard of J. Samuel White, Cowes, on December 1, 1942, launched on December 15, 1943, and completed on May 26, 1944.

TABLE ONE: Tonnage, Dimensions and Armament (as launched)

	<i>Saumarez</i>	<i>Volage</i>
Displacement	1730 tons	1777 standard
Length	363 ft (111 m)	363 ft (111 m)
Beam	35 ft (11 m)	35 ft 8 in (11 m)
Draft	14 ft (4.3 m)	10 ft (3.0 m)

Armament for each at launch

Four QF Mk XII 4.7 in (120mm) guns in single mounts CP Mk XXII
 Two QF 40 mm Bofors in twin mounts Mk IV
 Six QF 20mm Oerlikon guns, two in twin mounts Mk V and four in single mounts Mk III
 Two quadruple tubes for 21 in (533 mm) torpedoes, Mk IX¹⁶

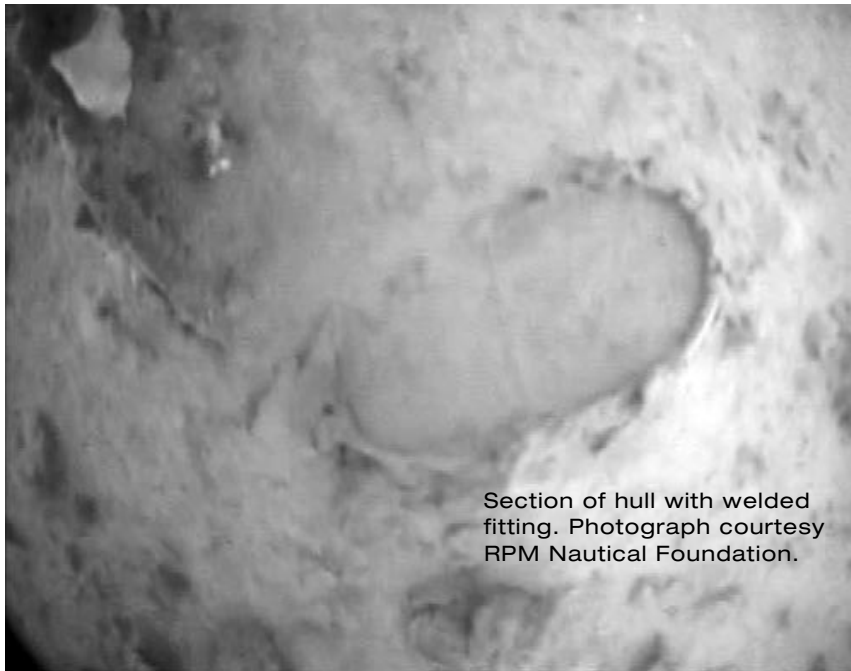
Following the Corfu Channel Incident, both destroyers successfully reached Corfu, and subsequently were sent to Malta. No known attempt was made to salvage or recover material from the bow of *Volage*, which sank at the site of the mine explosion. *Saumarez* was written off as a constructive loss and sold on September 8, 1950, and was reported scrapped in October 1950. *Volage*, after initial repairs, returned to the U.K. and was rebuilt as a Type 15 frigate in 1952-1953. Laid up and reported by some sources as scrapped in 1965, *Volage* was sold for scrap (some accounts say sunk) on October 28, 1972.¹⁷

Mining and Damage to *Saumarez* and *Volage*, October 22, 1946

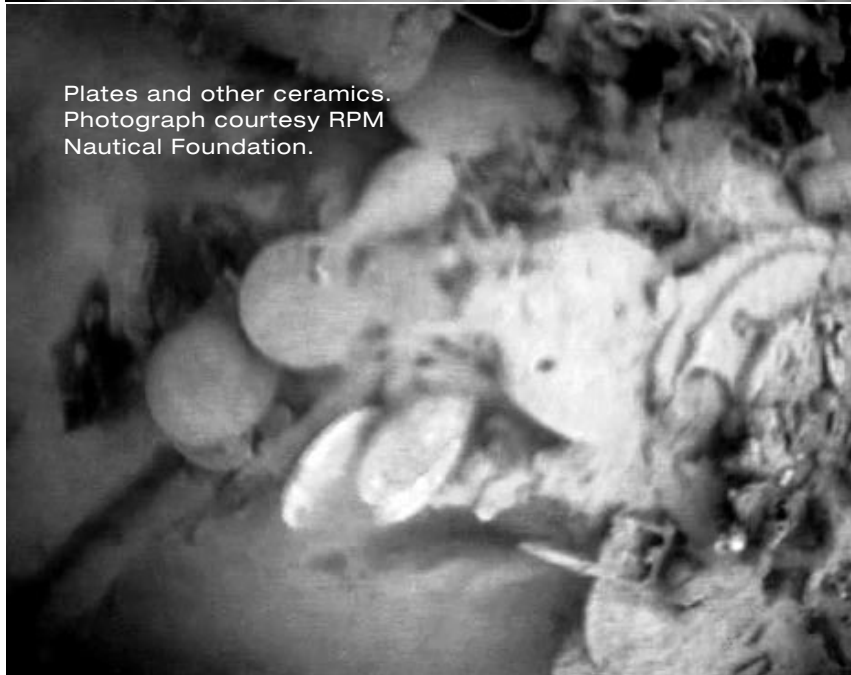
In the absence of after action reports and official surveys of the damage to both destroyers, I have relied on a secondary source¹⁸ which is based on interviews with surviving crew members from each vessel, as well as the submissions made by the U.K. to the International Court of Justice (1949).

After steaming from Corfu at 13:30 on October 22, 1946, the destroyers and the cruisers approached Kepi Denta (Denta Point) at the southern edge of the Bay of Saranda. At 14:47, the lead ship, HMS *Mauritius* signaled a port turn and a new course of 310 degrees. A reconstructed track course in Leggett (1976:36) depicts the turn outside the bay while Meçollari (2009:96-99) reconstructs the turn past the point and inside the bay. At 14:53 hours, while underway on this new course, HMS *Saumarez* struck a mine, later determined to be a German EMC (GY in British nomenclature) contact mine of World War II manufacture. The EMC was a spherical weapon 44 in (1.12 m) in diameter with seven Hertz horns (a German-invented chemical detonator that closed the circuit for firing) with a charge of 661 lbs (300 kg).¹⁹ The blast occurred a few feet forward of the bridge on the starboard side, opening an approximately “thirty-foot section ... from the keel to just below the bridge” to the sea.²⁰ *Saumarez* stopped and began to drift, with a fire from spilled fuel engulfing the bow area as the bow, flooded from the explosion damage, settled beneath the surface. HMS *Volage* approached to assist and take *Saumarez* in tow. After one failed attempt (the line parted) a new towline was secured and *Volage* proceeded to tow *Saumarez* at 15:30.²¹

At 16:06 (or 16:15, according to Leggett), *Volage* struck a second mine. That mine was also later determined to be a German-manufactured EMC. *Volage* reportedly hit the mine head on; “In a split second, forty feet of the destroyer, from the fore peak to just in front of ‘A’ gun turret, had vanished. Mess decks, store rooms, the paint shop, the cable locker containing tons of anchor cable, the anchors themselves, literally dissolved in the air.”²² Fragments of the bow



Section of hull with welded fitting. Photograph courtesy RPM Nautical Foundation.



Plates and other ceramics. Photograph courtesy RPM Nautical Foundation.

were observed flying into the air, and other fragments, “some weighing up to half a ton” landed on the ship, some on to the bridge.²³ Leggett (36) and Meçollari (96-99) chart the site of *Volage*'s mining off the north point of the Bay of Saranda. As previously noted, despite their damage, both destroyers remained afloat, and subsequently returned to Corfu under tow. *Saumarez* suffered 36 dead, 25 of whom were missing and presumed killed, while *Volage* lost eight men, seven of whom were missing, presumed killed.²⁴

Survey Operations and Identification

In July 2007, the RPM Nautical Foundation, a U.S. and Malta-based not-for-profit organization, began a comprehensive, ongoing archaeological survey of the

coast of Albania in cooperation with the Albanian Institute of Archaeology (AIA) and the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA). The inaugural season, conducted from the R/V *Hercules*, involved a multibeam sonar survey with remotely operated vehicle (ROV) assessment of targets to the 120 m contour. The area surveyed was from the border with Greece, through the Corfu Channel (but not into Greek waters) and to the Bay of Saranda, 21 km from the border. A total of 125 anomalies were encountered, and 67 were assessed with the ROV during the 2007 season. The majority of anomalies were found to be geological mud and mud/sand formations created as silt from the mouth of the Butrint River to the south is transported by current in a N-S direction. Fifteen shipwrecks were identified, fourteen of which were classified as “modern” and one of which was an ancient wreck of ca. 300–275 BCE. One of the fourteen other targets, briefly examined in 2007, was later (2009) determined to be the bow of HMS *Volage*.

During the 2009 field season the sonar target in this area was re-examined by the authors, ROV specialist Kim Wilson, and George Robb, Jr., President and founder of the RPM Nautical Foundation, who immediately assessed the potential of the 2007 “wreck” as the possible bow of *Volage* in response to Delgado's question of whether the surveys of 2007-2009 had encountered any traces of the Corfu Channel Incident. After consultation with Anastasi as the AIA and Albanian government representative, it was decided to non-intrusively reassess the site on June 28, 2009. An hour-long ROV dive was made to the site on that afternoon. The water is turbid and full of silt and hence it was dark; making visual observation less than ideal.

The site is located in the area of the position provided by Leggett and Meçollari for the mining of

HMS *Volage*. The seabed is a loose mud and silt. The sonar anomaly delineated by multibeam in 2007 and reconfirmed in 2009 is approximately 15 by 10 m in area and has a height of 1.5 m above the current level of the seabed. Active siltation and burial of the vessel remains at the site is visible. Some localized scouring and uncovering of cultural material is also possible. The majority of the remains visible were a section of a steel ship's hull, with explosion damage consistent with an implosion, exposed steel frames, electrical wiring, and a series of diagnostic artifacts. While identification of the site would have been better aided by the recovery of one or more diagnostic artifacts, because of the possibility of the site being the bow of HMS *Volage* and hence a war grave, no disturbance was planned and nothing was disturbed or removed from the site.

The principal features observed during the ROV reconnaissance, as time marked on the appended DVD of the "down camera" are as follows:

1. A small locker or watertight shipboard enclosure (such as for a control), at 10:09 minutes.
2. The end of a welded attachment to the steel hull, at 10:32 minutes.
3. Steel pipe, at 10:51 minutes.
4. Blast damage to the hull (note the bent and torn steel), at 11:04 minutes.
5. Another view of the round hole in the hull, at 11:13 minutes.
6. More blast damage, at 11:48 minutes.
7. White ceramic dishes and a carafe, at 12:16 minutes.
8. An exposed canteen at 12:28 minutes.
9. More plates, at 12:58 minutes.
10. Possible bone, at 13:46 minutes.
11. Ammunition, some in clips, appears to be .303 caliber, at 25:46–26:25 minutes.
12. A hole in the steel hull, with visible frames and electrical

wiring, at 24:08 minutes.

13. Another view of the ammunition at 26:49 minutes.

At this stage in the dive, the ROV moved off to examine a second anomaly, previously not assessed. No cultural material was visible, only mud. After an inspection of that area from 33 to 49 minutes into the dive, the ROV returned to the first site.

14. The sole of shoe or boot, at 30:24 minutes.
15. A canteen, at 31:37–32:17 minutes.
16. The ammunition, previously noted, at 49:11 minutes.
17. A steel girder of beam, blast affected, at 54:20 minutes.
18. A bottle or carafe, at 54:41 minutes.
19. The dishes previously seen, this view including mugs and a carafe, at 55:02 minutes.
20. Another shoe or boot, at 55:27 minutes.

The ROV dive concluded at this point and the ROV returned to the surface as the wind was building and sea conditions were less than optimal.

Based on the visual evidence, the cultural material at the site has been identified as the remains of the bow of HMS *Volage*, separated from the hull and sunk as a result of the mine explosion of October 22, 1946. This identification is based on the following factors:

- A. The location of the find corresponds with the historically reported position of HMS *Volage's* encounter with the mine;
- B. The size of the visible frames and structure are incongruous; i.e. the frames are too large for a 40 foot long steel vessel and suggest that the wreckage is a portion of a larger vessel;
- C. The remains at the site are those of an explosion damaged section of

the steel hull of a naval or military vessel, with electrical wiring, indicating a 20th century origin;

- D. The style of the ceramic dishes is consistent with British Royal Navy crew mess issue of the Second World War period; the dishes are in close association and several were deposited on the seabed together in a stack. The bow area of HMS *Volage* included the forward mess of the crew and the ship's stokers;
- E. The small locker, box or container is consistent with a military or naval vessel's construction;
- F. The WWII British-issue canteen;
- G. The ammunition, while not recovered for closer analysis, and not clearly observed, generally conform to the shape of British .303 round, in clips, and HMS *Volage*, if like other British destroyers, carried both .303 Lee-Enfield rifles and machine guns which utilized the .303 round (Campbell 1985:80);
- H. The shoes would indicate that the site represents an area of the ship where personal effects and clothing were stowed (as was the case with the forward mess areas of *Volage*), or that shoes associated with crew who were in the area at the time of the sinking are on the site.

In conclusion, while no artifacts were disturbed, excavated or recovered to facilitate identification, the nine points of evidence suggests no other alternative than that this site represents the remains of the bow of HMS *Volage*, and that this site is a war grave. While the vessel remains are within Albanian territorial waters, the identification of them as being from HMS *Volage* indicates a distinct legal status as the sovereign immune

property of the United Kingdom.

This report, with the dive footage from the ROV inspection, has been provided to the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Albania. The Corfu Channel Incident remains a subject of interest and controversy in both the U.K. and Albania. The archaeological identification of the bow of HMS *Volage* now provides exact coordinates for the second part of the incident, the mining of that vessel..

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Notes

- 1 Thomson 2005, 149
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 Kola 2003, 73
- 7 *ibid.*, 74
- 8 Thomson 2005, 150
- 9 Kola 2003, 74
- 10 Thomson 2005, 150
- 11 International Court of Justice 1949 and Thomson 2005, 150
- 12 Thomson 2005, 151
- 13 International Court of Justice 1949
- 14 Thomson 2005, 151
- 15 Manning 1961, 107
- 16 Chesneau 1980, 42–43
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 Leggett 1976
- 19 Campbell 1985, 270
- 20 Leggett 1976, 35
- 21 *ibid.*, 60–61
- 22 *ibid.*, 71–72
- 23 *ibid.*, 72
- 24 Leggett 1976, 154–155