

HMS VOLAGE DISCOVERY

In Albania with the RPM Nautical Foundation



RIGHT
(Top) Jeff Royal, Archaeological Director with RPM, in the control room.



(Mid) RPM's research vessel, R/V *Hercules* waits at the dock.

(Bot) The SeaEye Panther Plus ROV awaits deployment, attached to the *Hercules*' A-frame and lifting-winch apparatus.



PHOTOS James Delgado

Albania's coast has been a crossroads of cultures for thousands of years. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the country was closed to most of the world by the Communist government of Enver Hoxha. Following the death of Hoxha, Albania has gradually opened up to international business, tourism and most recently, nautical archaeology.

Since 2007 the RPM Nautical Foundation has methodically surveyed Albania's coastal waters, working with the Albanian Institute of Archaeology, the Albanian Ministry of Defense, and INA as part of a comprehensive search for shipwrecks and other submerged sites. A number of discoveries have been made, including a 4th-century BC Corinthian wreck, a Roman wreck from around 350 AD, scattered amphorae, and modern shipwrecks.

Thanks to RPM's George Robb, Jim Goold, and Jeffrey Royal, INA's Nicolle Hirschfeld (from Trinity University) has been working with them and AIA's Adrian Anastasi to survey and plan the excavation of the Corinthian wreck. I joined the team in 2009 to participate in the survey and a chance discussion onboard RPM's R/V *Hercules* led the team back to a target discovered in 2007. That target, after examination, was determined to be wreckage from an October 1946 Cold War naval encounter known as the "Corfu Channel Incident."

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, and decided to test Albania by sending warships through the channel. On October 22, 1946, two of their ships, the destroyers HMS *Saumarez* and HMS *Volage*, struck mines, killing 44 sailors and wounding 42 others. The bow of *Volage* was blown off and sank, carrying several men to the bottom with it.

A British force then moved into Albanian waters to clear any remaining mines. The two governments then entered into a protracted diplomatic and legal battle that ended with Albania losing the case, which went to the International Court of Justice at the Hague. 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.

The incident remains controversial to this day, with unresolved questions. One of those questions, exactly where *Volage* was when the ship hit a mine, has now been answered by archaeology. Rather than lying in the channel, the bow rests in the Bay of Sarande, just offshore of the port of Sarande. This raises the question of just how close the British ships were ordered to “the line” to test – or provoke – the Albanians in 1946.

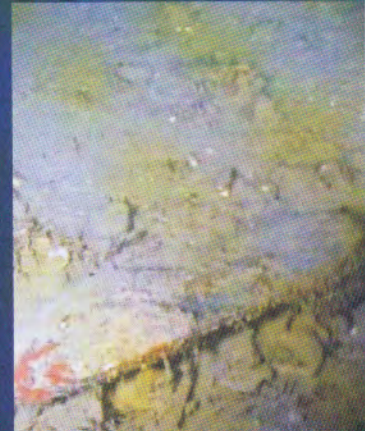
With *Hercules* held in place by the ship’s dynamic positioning system, remotely operated vehicle (ROV) pilot Kim Wilson maneuvered along the muddy seabed as George Robb, Jeff Royal, Adrian Anastasi and I studied the view screens. Our visibility was hampered by suspended sediment and reduced light levels at depth, but a number of features jumped out to the team. Explosion-torn steel, with exposed frames and electrical wiring, stacks of plates (the bow area was where some of the destroyer’s crew ate and slept), a British canteen, ammunition that appeared to be the right size and shape for

.303 light machine gun rounds, which the ship carried, and the soles of at least three shoes or boots all strongly suggested that we were not on a complete shipwreck, but rather part of the wreck of a modern (World War II or later) British warship that had been blasted off. We quietly filed an archaeological report with the British and Albanian governments, and in early November 2009, the rest of the world learned of the discovery.

Albania’s waters and coast are a virtual museum of the past, and the ongoing RPM surveys continue to catalog and demonstrate how much of that heritage is present and what it can teach us about history and archaeology. Not all of that history is beneath the water; our Albanian hosts took us to an abandoned, formerly top secret submarine base hollowed out of the heart of a coastal mountain, itself powerfully evocative of the Cold War era. The coastline of Albania is also lined with as many as 750,000 concrete pillboxes built during the Hoxha regime to keep outsiders out and Albanians in. The submarine base, the pillboxes, and the bow of HMS *Volage* are all tangible reminders of the politics and paranoia that shaped not only a nation’s history for decades, but which also had profound impacts on the rest of the world.

— James Delgado

For more information on the RPM Nautical Foundation check online at: <http://www.rpmnautical.org>



ABOVE
(Top) A bottle from the Forward Mess of HMS *Volage*.

(Mid) Sole of a boot or shoe in the wreckage.

(Bot) WWII British canteen in the midst of dishes from the ship.

PHOTOS Taken with the ROV and provided by RPM Nautical Foundation

