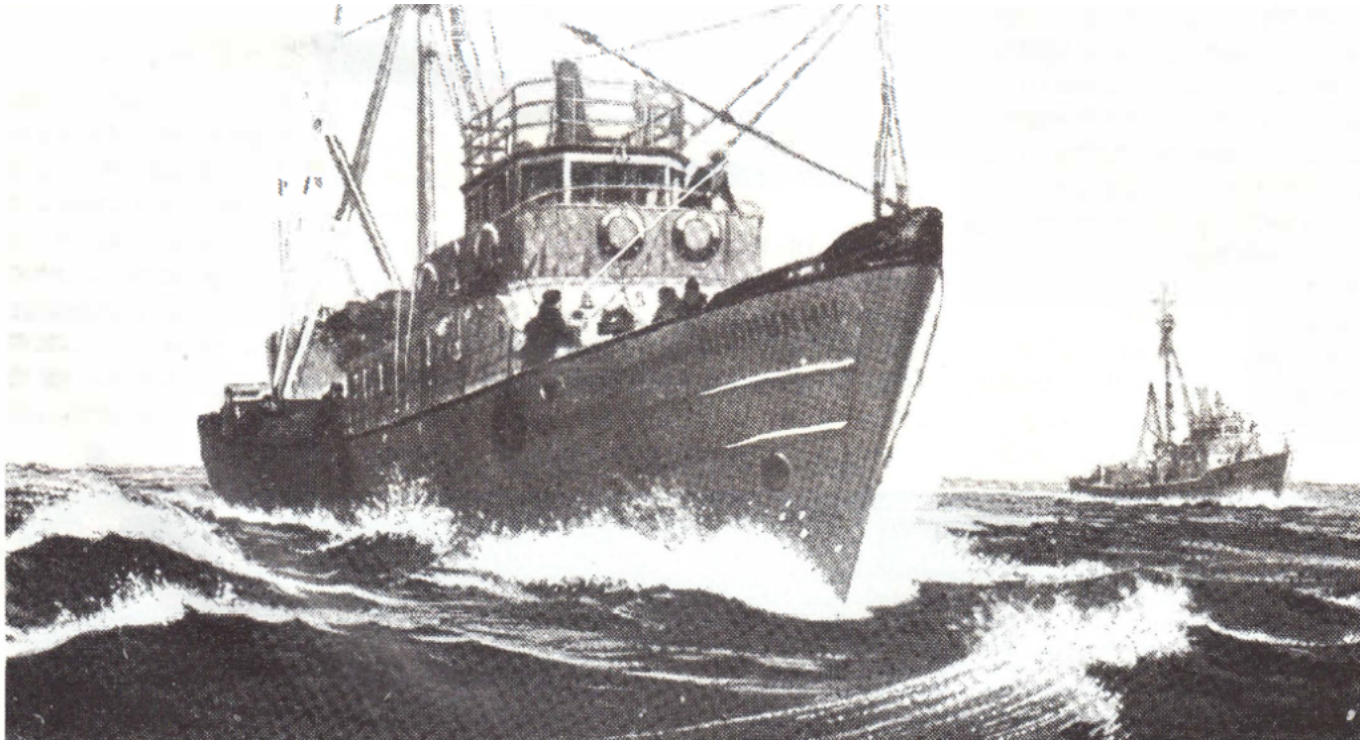
Down to the Sea for Wrecks

Posted on

Rodney Jonklaas



Wrecking as they need to say in Ye Olde Englishe days, was done by dastardly villains, coastal highwaymen, in the grande olde days of sailing vessels. But it is quite certain that much before that, in the days of the Romans, Greeks and Phoenicians plus assorted Egyptians and the like, a vessel come to grief was an invitation to loot and pillage. What could not be looted when the ship was still afloat or aground on a treacherous reef sank beneath the waves and though many were salvaged as soon as possible, many more went down never to be seen again.

But with the age of scuba-diving, underwater wrecking came into full focus and every few weeks or months, comes news of exciting discoveries as more and more divers invade the seas, and the technology to detect, identify, record and perhaps salvage the wrecks improves.

Our fair isle has a nice quota of wrecks around it. Some lie forlorn and rusty and sad on wave-swept shores, others sleep soundly in the depths. Some have never been found disintegrate and may slowly, take leaving centuries behind to only the most durable of metals. Gold is one of them ! But relax, wrecker-to-be; no one has yet found salvage gold off our coast in recent years. It may be for the lack of trying or ignorance of its whereabouts but mainly for the absence of opportunity, funds, and incentives.

We've found silver coins and quite a few exciting and valuable artefacts on wrecks off our – coastline, but as far as I know gold – no. But then again, I may be wrong….No one likes to advertise having found gold on the seabed. So let's treat shipwrecks as fun place to explore underwater. There is so much to see down there, because many fish regard them as heaven-sent condominiums the better with which to establish hiding places and hunting grounds.

Just about any shipwreck, however deep or shallow it may be, is a haven for finny ones; not to mention a untouched myriad shrimps, denizens of the sea. An untouched shipwreck is a sight for any enterprising diver's eyes. But the chances of finding them now are remote. Nearly all within diving range off our coastline have been located and worked over.

Perhaps there are a few up North-East, or off the wilder storm swept coastline of the Yala National Park and Arugam Bay, who knows? I saw evidence of another off the Great Basses reef two years ago, but in deep, current-swept conditions well away from the protective reef on which stands the lighthouse. This one is quite old and must be large. Each link of the worn anchor chain could weigh more than 25 kilos!

Because I am past 60, and started an affair with underwater actively in my late teens, my eyes have seen many wrecks; and on and off I found that I was the first modern day diver to explore 'virgin' wrecks, if they could be so-called. Diving on to one like this is an unforgetable experience. The fish were there, safe and happy, by the hundred thousands.

It takes you a few minutes to stop your fast breathing if you have air-tanks on and calm down. The deeper you go, the more exciting it gets and the larger the fish. Over the "Hermes" off Batticaloa. which is in 30 fathoms (180 ft), the sea life is astounding, even more if you are in the current, and the visibility good.

When scuba was first practised here, in the fifties, only a few enthusiasts had

access to the gear and they were the first modem visitors to several exciting shipwrecks. A few of them carried cameras and recorded much of the life and action for posterity. Mike Wilson was the first, and in the company of Arthur Clarke, the two did much to highlight our manmade reefs in several books and at least two fine films. “Beneath the Seas” of Ceylon, in 16 mm, is still the best-known and sought-after of underwater documentaries taken off Sri Lanka.

In the wake of Clarke and Wilson came others, but few dedicated authors or photographers. The fish hunters were there soon enough, and then a motley assortment of local and foreign treasure-seekers. Several accessible wrecks were well gone over. Souvenirs like ships’ lamps, small cannon, portholes, and even a spectacular commode in ceramic, were fished out.

Although it is very tempting to take out souvenirs from ship-wrecks, try not to. Every little man-made object down there can be of interest to serious underwater investigators. They are also beloved of fish of all sizes and shapes. I’d rather gaze at an anchor on the seabed surrounded by snappers and sweetlip than see it slowly rust away on someone’s lawn. Pointing a camera with flashgun at the inside of any wreck in clear water can give you some astounding pictures. The apparently dull grey and mustard coloured encrustations blaze into a kaleidoscope of crimsons, reds, golds and blues. These are corals, sponges, tunicates and marine worms that have settled down there and would prefer to be fed and grow in peace.

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There is a tribe of humanoids called underwater archaeologists. I have met at least one of them, who is world famous and who dedicatedly worked with us (meaning Mike Wilson and myself) on a wreck on the Great Basses where we found silver coins, cannon and other interesting artefacts. He is Peter Throckmorton who has several authoritative books to his credit. Fortunately he was able to work the wreck before the less studious mob came on to it. Here are some wrecks most of us know well and are worth visiting. Off Colombo, there is very little left of the “Hardingham” which was hit by Japanese bombs in 1942. She lies off Mutwal in about 50 feet. Same situation with the ‘Valiant Enterprise’ which was hit in the harbour, lay there

awash for many years, was then re-floated and towed out to Kapungoda. She was then regarded as a nice target for Air Force bombing practice. But although he is now under the water and almost invisible from the surface, quite a bit remains.

Just a half mile north is another little one of older vintage. Her bow still protrudes above the surface, and she is fished mercilessly during the season with net, line and spear. She is in only 30 feet, which is often turbid.

Up in Negombo there is one that went down one November morning when I went out for some spearfishing. The story is that the skipper of this Africa Line steamer had some appointment to keep with fishermen who go out to sea to fish for contraband. He decided to get just that bit closer, then a current and some playful swells cast him on a shallow reef and the hull was wedged in a crevice which seemed tailor-made for the purpose. By the time they decided to tow her out it was too late. The tides were lower still and she lay there for months. She is now awash, but round her there are lots of fish in only 10-15 feet of water. There is a very small wreck about a mile from the spot, not easily found unless you persuade a fisherman to take you there, but this little iron coaster lies right side up with empty holds and at least one vacant spot where that attractive ornamented ceramic lavatory seat used to be…

But for more and larger wrecks you need to go down South. Off Balapitiya there is one in over 200 feet of water which we have never dived to, but beloved of line fishermen who fish with great results from October to April. Off Akurala there are several. The ‘Conch’ is in bits of pieces near a wave swept rock; we have her bell which we salvaged minutes before a team of Hikkaduwa diver-pirates showed up. Since then she has had the full diving-tourist treatment, which means she is cleaned out of ‘souvenirs’ up to 200 kilos in weight. The ‘Earl of Shaftesbury’ is there too, huge pieces of hull and beam of all sizes littering the seabed at 50 feet or so. Here it is clear from November till March and so is popular with boatloads of divers from Hikkaduwa. The “Aenos” went down when Mike Wilson, Arthur Clarke and I were involved in underwater photography. We were the first ‘modern’ divers on her, and in her. The ‘Aenos’ broke up very soon and is now invisible. She is seldom, if ever, in water clear enough for average viewing. Very close is the ‘Alcyia’ which went down long before that having caught fire. Very little remains in the shallow murky water which conceals her, but if you are lucky, on a clear day you can see some of the big fish that visit her for snacks. Off Galle, an ancient seaport with numerous rocky reefs and outcrops near it, several wrecks are in evidence, some very recent and unexciting, others of better vintage, deeper and out of reach of the more ambitious

wreckers. The Sea off Galle harbour is seldom crystal clear, but move a few miles north and you come to some great diving, round Medagala.

Medagala and Ralagala are rocky outcrops you can see the surf breaking on, just as you pass Gintota and about two miles out to sea. There are two fine wrecks here and the deeper one, at 70 feet, is still a tremendous adventure for neophyte divers. Much of the hull is intact; there is a huge engine block, boilers, anchor and steering gear, and of-course the fish are here in force. The afternoons are nice to dive in because of the bright light and the abundance of colourful browsers that are on the wreck. Records have it that there are still wrecks (which carried gold) off Point de Galle, but as far as we know no one has hit the jackpot. It takes time, money patience and considerable skill with sophisticated metal-detecting apparatus to pinpoint a wreck that may be buried in mud or sand, or so coral and rock encrusted as to appear part of a reef.

Tangalle is a good wreck-diving site. The rocky outcrop seen from the resthouse, about 2 miles out to sea, has the remains of one on it but there is a better one close by on a small submerged reef which only the fishermen can show you. Tangalle diving is exciting and it is not always very clear or calm there.

There is a fine wreck on a rocky reef a few miles north and west of Hambantota, but the only way to get on to her is to rent a fishing boat from Hambantota Bay. But like most spots on this hostile coast, you get a few weeks a year diving comfortably out there, which perhaps is just as well, as it keeps the hordes of eager-beaver looters away. Go more north and east now till you come to the Ruhunu National Park and look out to sea. The Great Basses lighthouse will stand out like a slender white candle by day, and by night it will wink enticingly at you. Exciting is perhaps the right word, but remember that the seas here are dangerous and that it is only for about a month in the year that the diving off the reef is safe for average adventurers. A swim round the site and over two wrecks with only a snorkel is the right kind of warm-up for the more important scuba dive. You can spend weeks on the Great Basses and never suffer boredom. The best way to enjoy the Great Basses is to plan well ahead and be there from late March to early April. And if you are young, tough and adventurous, living in a hotel on shore, taking a small boat out at dawn every day, rendezvousing with a larger boat and diving from about 8.30 to 2 P.M. is the usual form. This is what we have been doing since 1960 when we were the first modern divers on the Basses.

And from the Great to the Little Basses is about 25 miles of lovely blue ocean,

running along or just seaward of a ridge which is only a few fathoms down. Less than 2 miles from the Little Basses and its lighthouse is a recent wreck, say about 20 years old, which is now below the waves and located only by a professional fisherman who knows his way around. It is well worth a visit because it’s not the metal work and cargo that is interesting; it is the fish. Every species that hunts comes to this wreck for the bait fish which shelter there. There are usually barracudas about in the early morning or late evening. You can spot sharks and sting-rays and run a list on your fish-watching note pad which will easily top 20 species of biggies.

The Little Basses reef is less in extent and shallower than the Great Basses. But it makes for interesting and safe diving, lots of fish and at least one wreck – but only bits and pieces of it. On. my first dive there I recovered the ship’s bell and donated it to the Imperial Lighthouse Commission.

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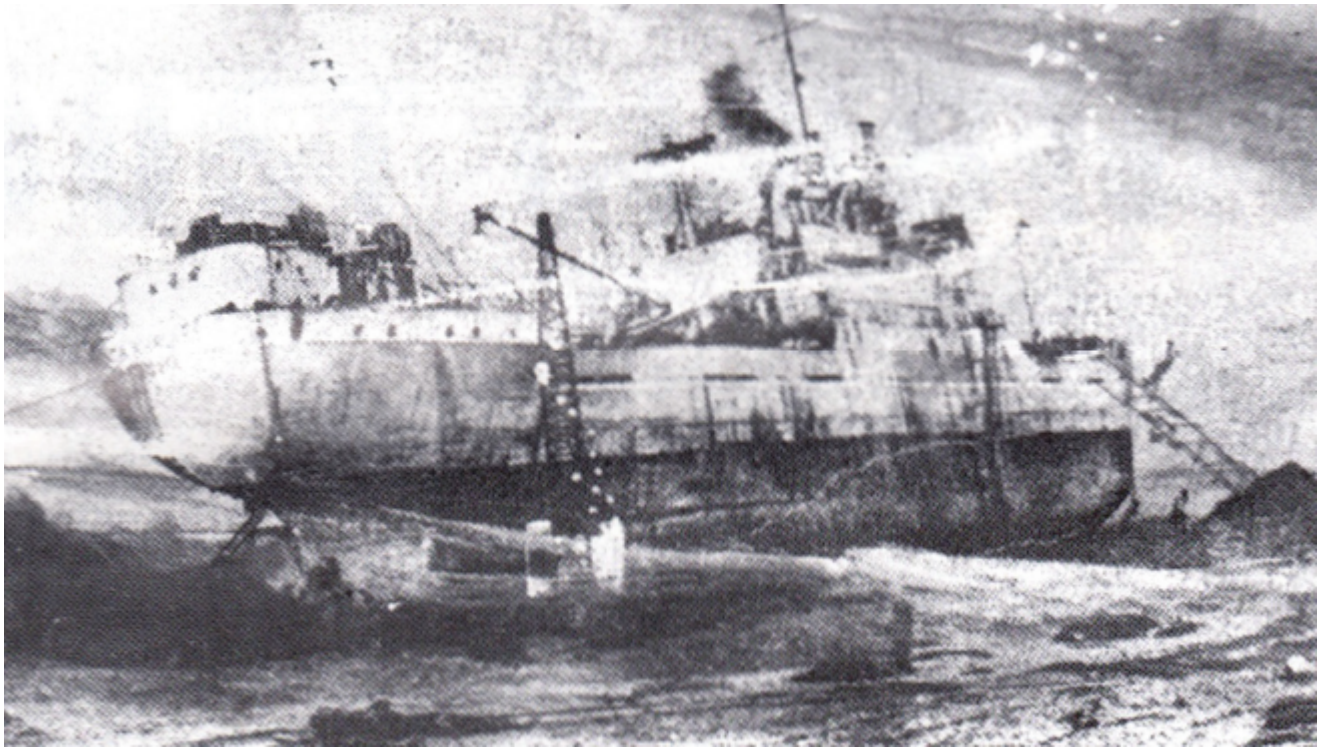
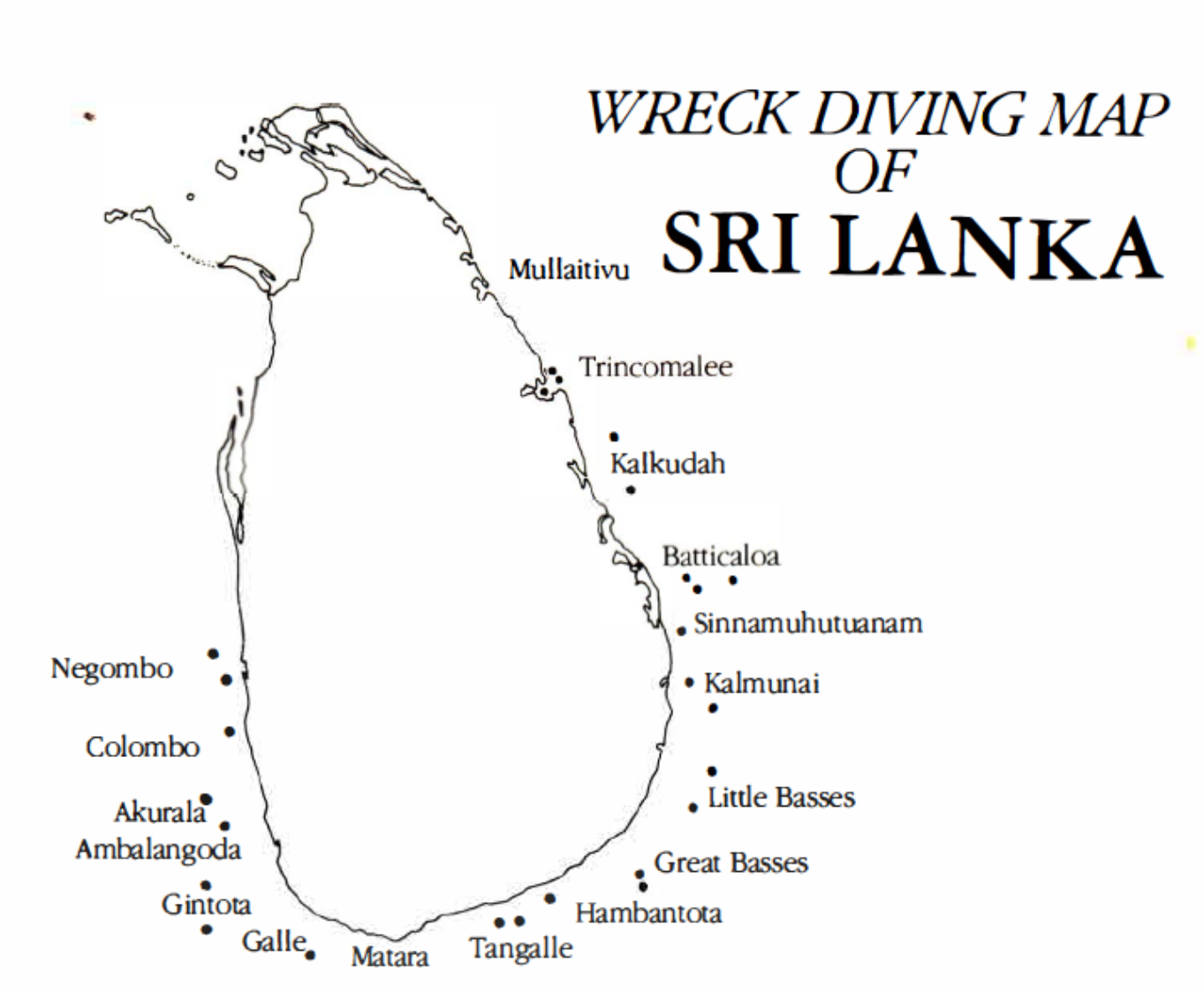
The Komari reef which is farther north has one wreck. Off Tirrukovil there is another perched on a surfswept reef which you can just see on the surface; and there are two wrecks on the reef at Kalmunai too, also worked over but quite extensive and good fun to explore. There are lots of corals here and the scenery is beautiful. Batticaloa is a very special spot for shipwrecks. Close to shore on a coral reef are two favourites of beginners and amateur divers.

Worked over, of course, and systematically fished, but plenty of metal work to see and very clear water with many colourful reef-fish. It is the wreck of the ‘Hermes’, a British aircraft carrier that went down in April 1942, hit by over 30 Japanese bombs, that is the greatest wreck of them all off our coastline. She lies on her side, a sad and sombre sight, in 30 fathoms of water, not 10 miles offshore but 5, as we were to prove some years ago. The ‘Hermes’ dive is the Dive de la Dive for ‘ wrecksplorers ‘, to coin a word. Several of our local divers and a few exaggerating foreigners have claimed to have dived it, but only my friend Cedric and I have done so in the strictest sense of the word. And of course, the renowned team of film-makers led by the late Peter Throckmorton who filmed part of ‘Blue Water White Death’ here in the seventies. Only well-trained and experienced divers, working with all the safety facilities possible, should explore the ‘Hermes’. At that depth and in not-so-clear water, always a current, there are many things that can go wrong.

Trincomalee ! The best diving on the East coast, lots of bays and coves, very deep and shallow water and some wrecks thrown in. The more recent World War II

casualties of small vessels have been salvaged and removed for scrap. But here and there bits and pieces remain. There are fuselages of dumped Fairey Fulmer aircraft off Grommet Rock in less than 80 feet of water, ancient cannon balls and stubby iron cannon off Elephant Island, very shallow, which generations of divers have looked at. There is a huge anchor and some chain on the boulder-strewn bottom off Chapel Rocks and dumped bombs (rendered harmless, of course) among the rocky caves at Swami Rock More recently Dutch Cannon and wreckage have been found close to Foul Point, which is where the attempted looting in the 1980's was thwarted by the Navy. There must be many more we don't know about, but because Trincomalee is deep and the underwater reefs not clearly charted finding one would be more luck than skill. For years divers have hunted for the 'Diomedes' which went down with a cargo of gold, not all of which was salvaged. Although Diomedes Rock is charted, the wreck which bears the name has yet to be found. Further north there are said to be ancient wrecks off Mullaitivu, but these are for the new generation divers to discover in the years to come. Much of the adventure in wreck-locating lies in the unknown blue depths. When you swim down to a strange purplish and artificially-shaped object on the seabed, you get that tingling feeling. Even a well-known one that has been worked over still provides a thrill. Wreck diving is a very special underwater adventure.•




WRECK DIVING MAP
OF
SRI LANKA
Mullaitivu
Trincomalee
Kalkudah
Batticaloa
Sinnamuhutuanam
Kalmunai
Little Basses
Great Basses
Hambantota
Tangalle
Matara
Galle
Gintota
Ambalangoda
Akurala
Colombo
Negombo