

04/13/2006

A Titanic Adventure

By: Mike Greger

David Concannon has made four dives to the Titanic's icy grave, but never like this.

Last August, Concannon, a Malvern resident, led an expedition to the wreck site located just off the coast of Newfoundland as part of the History Channel's new series, Deep Sea Detectives. The show, which aired on Feb. 26 and was the highest-rated program ever on the History Channel, sought to prove its so-called grounding theory, one which ponders the question of whether or not Titanic featured a double-bottom hull that was "peeled back like a potato" when it smashed into the iceberg, contradicting the widely accepted theory which says the ship bumped along the iceberg causing a thin line of scratches in its air-tight compartments. Advertisement

"We found ribbons of steel in the hull section," said Concannon, referring to the pieces of hull plating which are riveted together on the side, "but it didn't show double-bottom hull or any evidence of the grounding theory. But what we did find was not just a debris field, but a corridor leading away from the wreck site that stretches for about 1 1/4 miles."

In the corridor, positioned south of the main wreck site, there are hundreds of leather shoes, still appearing to be in good condition since bacteria won't feed on rawhide. Concannon believes this is the spot where many of Titanic's passengers were dumped when the ship "spilled its guts."

"That's the story that's never been told, the human element in that corridor," Concannon said. "Those shoes were at one time attached to people."

Concannon's own story began almost a decade ago when he was invited to join the exalted Explorer's Club in New York City. One of the few lawyers, and one of only 10 people to ever be inducted under the age of 30, Concannon was quickly appointed as the club's general counsel.

In 1998, he was approached with litigation, a case he was advised not to take by his firm's managing partner, involving a preliminary injunction prohibiting one of the club's board of directors, Dr. Don Walsh, from exploring Titanic.

"He said, 'Don't take the Titanic case, it's too much fun and it will distract you from the work we want you to do.' The alternative was a toilet-paper price-fixing case," said Concannon with a smirk.

He not only took the case, but took it all the way to the Supreme Court and won. Shortly after, Concannon left and started his own firm in Wayne (Law Offices of David G. Concannon LLC), which defends the rights of small businesses. He also manages Explorer Consulting LLC, a company that helps organize and finance at

least one major exploration project each year.

"All of it because I happened to be in the right place at the right time," said Concannon, who made his first deep-sea dive at age 14. "I'm a lucky guy to be able to balance this while being a dad and still earn a living and pay the bills."

Since then, Concannon has participated in three Titanic expeditions, including one commissioned by the U.S. Government in 2003. On Concannon's first dive in July of 2000, he recovered the suitcase of Edgar Samuel Andrew, a 17-year-old Argentinian, who had purchased a ticket on Titanic's sister ship, Oceanic, but by twist of fate ended up on its ill-fated sibling instead. In it contained a note addressed to his friend, Josey, stating, "I wish the Titanic were lying on the bottom of the ocean."

And on his second dive in 2000, he found Titanic's original compass from the bridge, almost 15 years after the ship's initial discovery by Robert Ballard in 1985.

"I've spent probably 50 hours on the Titanic and you won't see the same thing twice," Concannon said. "It still amazes me that more people stand on the top of Mt. Everest in a single day each year than have ever even seen the Titanic."

The 2000 expedition also marked the first time Concannon spied the hull section that the History Channel hoped would prove its grounding theory. The section accounts for approximately one-tenth of the total hull of Titanic and is in pristine condition.

While it showed no glimpse of being double-bottomed, it did open up a new debate for Titanic scholars who have long believed the ship's bow became so weighted down with water that it caused it to sink.

"It's the other way around. They're more stretched and torn, meaning the compression was at the top," said Concannon, who noted there was no visible sign of any compression in the hull pieces. "What that means is the final breakup was a surprise, so maybe the ship's crew thought they had a floating lifeboat that was going to last the four hours it was going to take the Carpathia to arrive."

But the damaged shell-turned-life preserver lasted only 2 hours, 20 minutes on the morning of April 15. By the time the nearest rescue vessel, Carpathia, finally arrived at 4:10 a.m. all that remained were the dark ripples of the North Atlantic.

While Titanic remains the Holy Grail for deep-sea divers, Concannon quickly points to a wooden slave ship he helped discover in the Bermuda Triangle as his moment of Zen.

After three days spent diving 16,000 feet (to put that in perspective, Titanic lies 12,460 feet below the surface and takes about three hours to reach by submersible), the crew didn't know exactly what they had discovered until it uncovered a snuff box containing 14 gold coins wrapped in a newspaper, dated 1810, outlining the sale of slaves.

"That was pretty neat," said Concannon, who has also summited Mt. Everest twice. "It was only the second

slave ship ever discovered and the only one found still in tact."

While Concannon's next expedition remains unchartered, there are rumblings over an excursion in Guadalcanal that would have him searching for lost World War II airplanes. Of course, Titanic is also on the docket, something his son, Ian, 9, isn't exactly waking his dad up in the middle of the night to pursue.

"He still measures time in Titanic time," Concannon said, who also has a daughter, Megan, 7. "When he was only four I was away for 3 1/2 weeks and that was a lifetime for him. Every time I took an expedition, he was like, 'Is it Titanic?' As long it wasn't Titanic it was OK."

Still, this real-life Indiana Jones insists his main focus is law. Fifty out of the 52 weeks in his date book are devoted to helping small businesses fight corporate takeover.

He's won more than \$38 million for Main Line businesses. Last month, he defended a local insurance company who lost a bid because the competition was working without a license.

"It kind of repels law-firm clients," Concannon said, referring to his exploration work. "They think if we find a historic shipwreck, we'll call you. But it's not like that. It's just as gratifying to win a law case where 20 people are counting on you to save their jobs."

When he's not juggling two businesses or snorkeling in Palau with explorer friends like Ballard and moon-landing astronaut, Buzz Aldrin, Concannon enjoys giving speeches detailing his adventures at local schools like Radnor Elementary, Gladwyne Elementary, Malvern Prep and Great Valley.

He jokes, "If I can keep one kid from being a lawyer, then I've done my job."



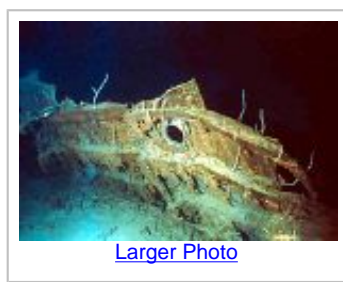
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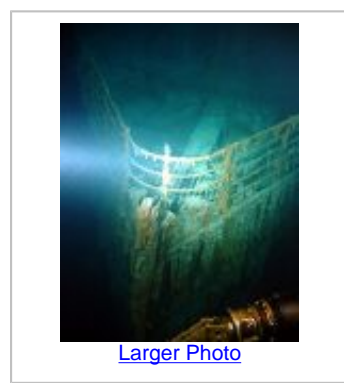
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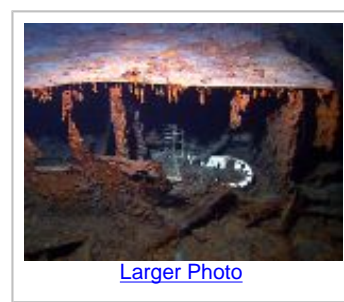
Page of 2
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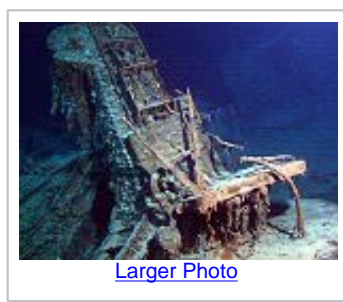
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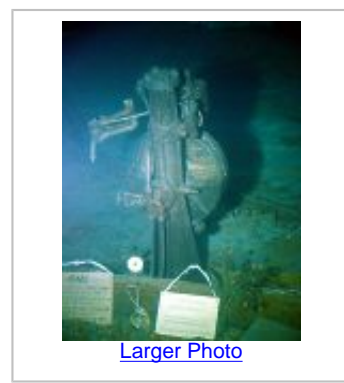
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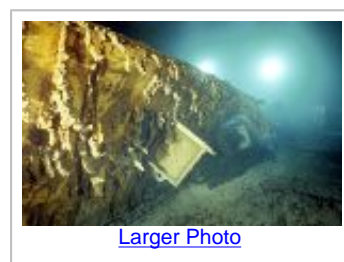
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Page of 2
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« [\[Previous Page\]](#)

Page of 2



[Larger Photo](#)

« [\[Previous Page\]](#)

Page of 2

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