



# diving into history



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IMAGES: FABIO RUBERTI, A. BOLZONI, M. VALENTI, R. LAGHEZZA

I am descending into the depths, something I have done so many times before. As always I am repeating the same actions, with the same attention and coolness; but I also realise that my desire to see the wreck is something more, almost a hunger. The water is so clear that suddenly, on the edge of my vision I think I can see the bottom, but I know that it is too soon, too shallow. I realise that it is not the seabed below as I start to discern two enormous, powerful propellers. One of them is completely wrapped by a trawl net that passes over the rudder and disappears into the depths. I start to see the other propeller and the gigantic hull of the wreck, so big that I mistake it for the bottom. I know for certain that I, and the rest of the team following me down the shot-line will soon be exploring the final resting place of the Szent Istvan.

To me the Szent Istvan is more than a wreck; she is a magnet, a piece of history that has drawn a few explorers to her. Her story has come to symbolise the tumultuous events of the last year of the Great War and the lives of the men involved in her story: Admiral Miklos Horthy de Nagybanya, Commander in Chief of the Imperial Royal Austro-Hungarian Navy, and Lieutenant Commander Luigi Rizzo, Commander of the IV squadron of the Royal Italian Navy.

The wreck stretches away from me. Directly ahead is one of the propellers, I can't exactly make out its dimensions, it soars over me. Although fascinated and distracted by it, I remember that I must get on with the dive plan. I look towards support divers Andrea and Claudio, who get into position and I get the OK. I signal to the others that I'm swimming down and I glide towards the stern turning back to have a look. It really is beautiful; the stern has the curves of woman! Now I am in front of the admiral hall Windows, a large conger peeps out from the entrance to the officers' mess. I could remain here for the whole dive, trying to work out every detail, but our plan is a general inspection so I must continue swimming deeper. The stern upper deck raised about 3 or 4m from the bottom. I swim into a room and start to swim towards the bow. Because the ship is upside down this is the port side, but I perceive it as my right. It is unbelievable! Despite the passage of time and the marine growth everything is in its place; hatchways, door, bits, fair leads.

After few meters I see the first triple 305 mm gun turret, it is imposing sight; the first gun is covered in a lost trawl net that is wafting in the current, giving to the scene a surreal image. The visibility is very good, even if my bubbles create silt when they hit the deck above me. I swim on and see the second triple turret guns coming out of the sand. At this point I decide to ascent to reduce my gas consumption and extend the exploration of the hull. As soon as I am outside I feel the light current against me that will allow me to drift back to the shot-line. I look towards the ship and identify the first side pillbox and 105 mm gun, on my right and a little further down, I can clearly see the remains of the stern mast. Towards the bow the bottom is littered with wreckage that is difficult to identify I check my time - not much left. I turn back and see Marco and Raffaele who signal that if I swim so quickly they can't take pictures and follow me at the same time. But our aim is try to get to the bow break. Ahead of me is a huge void that I swim to and look inside lighting the scene up with my torch to perceive the devastation.

All too soon the bottom time comes to an end and we must ascent. We follow the current along the top of the hull to the shot-line. There, waiting for us is Andrea and Claudio. The rest of the team meet up and swimming towards me is Cesare who's grin is so big that he nearly loses his regulator. After him comes Carla and Massimiliano who are both very happy. The ascent begins, gas changes to EANx 36, gas changes to EANx 80, decompression over its tea and a snack on board. It is very difficult dampen enthusiasm and let understand that the day is still not at the end. Anyway there's always tomorrow!

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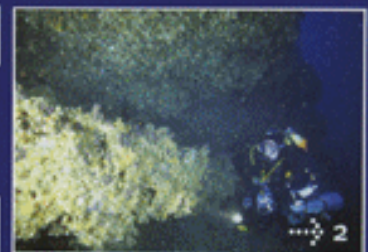
**MAIN:** Expedition divers decompress

→ 1: passing over the hull

→ 2: Exploring the upturned turret

→ 3: Divers place the memorial wreath

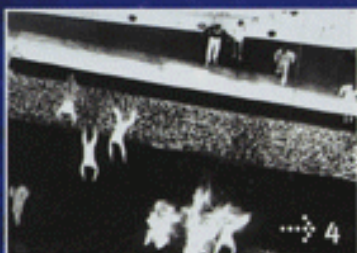
→ 4: Gun turret exterior





- MAIN:** The shot-line attached to the propeller
- ❖ 1: The newly launched Szent Istvan
  - ❖ 2: Triple 305m gun turrets
  - ❖ 3: Torpedoed, the Szent Istvan starts to sink
  - ❖ 4: Remarkable footage of the crew abandoning ship

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Miklos, or Nicholas in Hungarian, was born in 1868 into a family of wealthy landowners. At an early age he joined the Royal Imperial Navy and soon became the Field Adjutant of Emperor Franz Joseph. When World War One was declared he took command of cruiser Novara and soon developed a reputation as an aggressive and audacious commander with talent.

The main role of the Austro-Hungarian Navy during the war in the Adriatic Sea consisted mainly of raids and skirmishes against the Otranto Naval barrage; three defensive lines extended between the coastline of south Italy on one side and the coastline of Greece and Albania on the other. After a number of unsuccessful raids the planing of an attack against Otranto was given to Captain Horthy de Nagybanya. Leading a naval squadron consisting of the cruisers "Novara", "Saida" and "Helgoland", the destroyers "Csepel" and "Balaton", and three submarines, he set sail on the evening of 14th May 1917. Before long they came into contact with an allied convoy, sinking a cargo ship and the Italian torpedo boat destroyer "Borea". All through the night, the squadron attempted to force away through the barrage during which time 14 British trawlers and drifters were sunk, but by the following morning Horthy was forced to withdraw as an Anglo-Italian squadron under the command of the Italian admiral Alfredo Acton appeared at the battle. The squadron was formed by the British cruisers HMS Dartmouth, with admiral Acton aboard and HMS Bristol and the Italian cruisers Aquila and Mirabello, escorted by four Italian and three French destroyers. In the ensuing battle both parties received severe damage; the cruiser Novara was hit several times and Captain Horthy de Nagybanya was severely wounded in the leg. Horthy de Nagybanya complained several times about the poor strength of the forces he had to make the attack, stating that with a stronger force he would have completely destroyed the barrage. The Emperor, the Court and the German admiralty appreciated his bravery in the attack and, after a short period of command aboard the dreadnought "Prinz Eugen", on 1st May 1918 he became Admiral in Chief of the Kaiserliche und Koenigliche Kriegsmarine at only fifty. The war was not going well and the young Emperor Karl I wished to reach an armistice with the Italians. Horthy de Nagybanya planned a combined operation together with the Chief of Staff of the Imperial Army. The Navy's task would be to attack and destroy the Otranto barrage with the High Seas Fleet and open the way to Mediterranean, the Army would force the Piave Front, in North Italy and reach Venice. If they succeeded the Emperor would be in a far stronger position during any armistice negotiations. The operation should have took place at dawn of 11th June 1918, Admiral Horthy was getting ready the whole High Seas Fleet to set sail toward Otranto, finally he have got the forces he would have liked to have the previous year!

Luigi Rizzo, Gigi to his friends, was born in Milazzo, Sicily, on 8th October 1887 from a modest family of Sicilian patriots and sailors. His uncle had been with Garibaldi and he had grown up with war stories and those of the sea. Luigi had a strong personality, at twenty-three he was already a merchant navy captain and as the harbour pilot for Messina he saved a ship during a storm and received his first medal for bravery. During 1911 and 1912 he fought as midshipman in the Italo-Turkish war and in June 1915 he was recalled to the navy as a submarine lieutenant. The Adriatic conflict consisted mainly of raids and submarine attacks. The Italians created a special units, one of the main weapons used were specially armed anti submarine motorboats that could also be used for coastal patrols and defence.



The Italian poet and writer Gabriele D'Annunzio christened the motorboats with the Latin motto "Memento Audere Semper" (remember always to dare) or MAS. Rizzo joined the special-forces squadron and immediately showed his bravery and ability to carry out this raiding style of conflict: he attacked the Austro-Hungarian cruisers Wien and Budapest forcing them to retreat and later he attacked the harbour of Trieste sinking the cruiser Wien. On 11th February 1918, along with Commander Costanzo Ciano and the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, he attacked the heavily defended Naval base of Buccari, near Fiume damaging cargo ships and gaining his forth-silver medal. He also became famous with the Austro-Hungarians who considered him to be the number one target and planned a raid against the Ancona MAS base in order to destroy his motorboats and take either capture or kill Rizzo. The raid failed and the sixty Austrian commandos were taken prisoner. Rizzo personally interrogated the commanding officer lieutenant Joseph Weith expressing him his appreciation for their bravery and chivalrously shaking his hand.



During the last months of the Great War, the Commander in Chief of the Royal Italian Navy Admiral Thaon de Revel issued several directives to intensify raids against enemy harbours, the bombing of coastal defences and railways, offensive patrolling and mine sweepings part of a specific political and military strategy. On the morning of the 9th July 1918 Lieutenant Commander Luigi Rizzo left the Ancona harbour with his boat MAS 15 accompanied by MAS 21 of Midshipman Aonzo to patrol and mine sweep along the opposite Dalmatian coastline.

During the same time the Naval base of Pola was frenetic with activity. All ships were getting ready to sail divided into two naval task-forces; the first formed by the flag ship Viribus Unitis and had Admiral Horthy aboard the battleship Prinz Eugen along with several other minor units that had orders to attack and force the Otranto barrage. The second taskforce comprised of the battleships Szent Istvan and Teghettoff, the destroyer Velebit and Torpedo boats TB 76,77,78, 79, 81,87. They had orders to protect the action of the first group. Admiral Horthy set sail on the evening of 8th June 1818 toward the protected harbour of Slano north of Gravosa, not far from Dubrovnik. At 22,15 on the 9th June the second taskforce set sail toward the rendezvous point, located at Isola Grossa near Zara. Things had not gone well for the second group from the start: a problem in opening the Pola harbour delayed the departure, then the overheating of a hearing reduced the forces speed from 17.5 to 12.5 knots. At dawn of 10th June the group was still in front of Sansego Island and still behind schedule. At almost the same time Rizzo was ending his fruitless mine sweeping patrol in the Selva Channel between Premuda Island and Lutrosnak Rock.

He was disappointed not to have seen any action so he delayed his return for half an hour. At 03.15 he decided to sail towards Ancona, but almost immediately saw the smoke of funnels and he thought it was the smoke of torpedo boats sent to attack him. He decided to take the fight to them. Getting closer and closer he saw the size of the taskforce and realised that the enemy hadn't seen him. He ordered MAS 21 to attack second battleship in line, he was going to attack the first one with MAS 15. He performed a fearless manoeuvre cutting across the path

of the taskforce then the two MAS veered to starboard and entered the formation. At less than 500m Rizzo launched his two torpedoes against the first battleship. He saw the first torpedo explode between the two funnels and the second one a little further aft. Aboard MAS 21, Aonzo fired his torpedoes, the first one failed to launch, but the second was heard to explode. The two torpedo boats sped away toward Italy. Amongst the battle group there was total chaos; nobody realising what had happened. Only the destroyer Velebit saw the two torpedo boats and chased them, almost s rammed MAS 15 before Rizzo launched a mine from the escaping motorboat that hit the destroyers bow. The Velebit totally lost its bow but managed to stay afloat and return to the battle group. Aboard Szent Istvan nobody knew had fired the torpedoes. At first the damage didn't seem too severe. The Tegetthoff was requested to get ready to tow Szent Istvan. There was an initial list of 10° and Commander Seitz hoped to save his ship in nearby Gulf of Briguglie in the Melada Islands. But before the tow began the ship started to settle. Commander Seitz ordered to the ship to be abandoned and at 5.58 the Szent Istvan turned over and fifteen minutes later sank taking with her 89 of the crew.

At 7.05am the battle group departed with 976 survivors back to Pola. Admiral Horthy was informed of the sinking and decided not to carry on with the attack on Otranto. The Austro-Hungarian Army had already launched the land attack on the 15th June but failed and on the 24th October the Italians counterattacked. By the 3rd November the Austro-Hungarian requested an armistice.

The sinking of the Szent Istvan was seen as much more than the simple loss of one ship. For the Austro-Hungarian's it was not only a strategic defeat, but represented the end of their Empire. The Italians considered it their biggest naval success of the Great War and a political and diplomatic success to be used during the peace conference. The C.I.C of the British Grand Fleet, Admiral Sir David Beatty sent a congratulations telegram to the Italian navy and MAS 15. The telegram can still be seen at the Vittoriano (Unknown Soldiers Monument) in Rome. Rizzo was awarded his second gold medal and died in 1951 with the rank of Admiral.

BEYOND THE BLUE MAGAZINE >>



## The Expedition

We are finally all here on the jetty of Zara for the ferry to Melada (Molat). Most of us have travelled overland through the winding roads of Dalmatia; only Cesare and Raffaele preferred to take the ferry from Ancona. The team consists of twelve people: eleven men and one woman and tons of equipment packed into three vans and a station wagon. The Croatian team have taken care of the logistic of accommodation on the island, the gas and the compressor. The small ferry is nearly half filled by the expedition. Our expedition may start here but it has been a long journey. In 1995 during the EUDI (Italian Dive Show) in Rome my friend Neven and I discussed a wreck we'd heard had been previously located by a group of Hungarians called the "Szent Istvan" We decided to organise a joint Italian-Croatian expedition to the wreck, a historical symbol for both our countries. Our plans followed the normal course of ups and down's; the Ministry of the Culture of Croatia put the wreck under tight protection so we had to deal with various official bodies. In the spring of 1999.

I finally met the members of the ministry in Zagreb and after a positive meeting our plan seems to be coming true. But, as sometimes happens, other problems arise and the whole thing grinds to a standstill.

During the spring of 2003 I received a call from Neven, who brought the good news that we could have permission to dive in June. "Perfect!" I thought "this is the 85th anniversary of the sinking, so on the 10th June we will lay a wreath together as a reconciliation between our two people". The organisation starts but just before June we receive another call, for "logistics and bureaucratic reasons", the permission will now be granted in July.

All things considered, postponing the ceremony by one month wouldn't affect the value of this gesture. Now we are on the jetty at Zara and tomorrow is the big day. We used the two-hour sail to discuss the regulations that had been placed on us by the ministry with Jasen and Neven. We soon arrived in Molat, a delightful Mediterranean paradise where we received another nice surprise: the logistic base was a beautiful villa near to the quay with a big garage to store the filling station and a huge room to assemble the equipment. It also had a new pergola for the meals and the briefings and debriefings. This came as a shock as we expected a much more basic accommodation. The villa had all the home comforts: comfortable rooms, swimming pool, jacuzzi, barbecue; the others looked at me as if to say "OK stop everything and enjoy this holiday!" But we are here to dive and tomorrow is the big day, the wake-up time is at five and everything must be ready. Under a blazing sun we

unloaded the equipment and set up the filling station. A small tractor carried the J-cylinders of oxygen and helium up to the station and immediately we start to assemble the cylinders that we had brought already pumped with the right gas mix. After that we analyse and record the gas mixing and check all the equipment twice. At 8,30 p.m. we are ready, we settle into our rooms and after showering we have dinner. Jadranka, our cook, had prepared a good seafood dish - (yes it is difficult to believe, but we also provided a cook!)



The morning after, we awoke at five. After two and half hours sailing we are on the presumed position. We have two slightly different co-ordinates; the first from the ministry and the second one from the maritime police. We started the search, but something is not right, there is nothing at either position. We try all the possible methods to find the wreck, but in vain. The skipper of the Laura contacted some local fishermen. Surely they must know the right position if they want avoid the loss of their nets. After more searching our happy shouts signals a mass of red pixels on the sounder screen, it is a big wreck and can be only one thing. The whole search had lasted about four hours until finally Toni threw a marker buoy over, he'd always said "nema problema, the wreck is there and nobody will lift it!" On our next trip out Szent Istvan we deployed another buoy, and Neven and Jasen dived to fix the descent line to the propeller shaft. As soon as they came back we heard about the superb visibility as we attached the decompression station and spare deco bottles, then the team began their preparation. The first dive would be just to orientate the group with the wreck. After two and half hours steam we are back to Molat, for the whole journey back we still had the sight of the big battleship on our minds. We unload the equipment from the boat and we put it in the vans, at the base its unloaded once more, disassembled and identified which bottles were to be filled with what gas after that Toni and Jurica began filling -by 9,30 p.m. we're ready for dinner. This was the daily program during the expedition; the only difference was the start time at 7,00am and after breakfast we did the first briefing of the day to plan the dive and designate tasks.

Over the next dives we continued the exploration of the stern and the identification of the various features, measuring and collecting survey data. One team examined the tear in the bow that was really impressive, it had happened because the ship sank by the bow first and impacted with the seabed 66m below while the stern was still on the surface. The impact caused the big tear that in some places is about 4/5m wide and allowed you to swim inside though this was quite dangerous due to the amount of broken and twisted plates. The wreck is upside down lying on the superstructure and tilted at about 15° on the starboard; consequently the left side is raised about 3 or 4 m from the bottom. Beginning from the stern the most impressive thing are the two huge propellers with their rudders; on both sides there are auxiliary anchors but they are quite difficult to see because of the build up of sediment. On the keel between the two rudders are the stern torpedo tubes.

Further down you find the first large window of the Admiral Hall and looking towards the bow you can see the first triple turret with the barrels turned toward the left, which had been done to try and balance the seawater rushing in as the ship sank. The barrels from the second turret rise out from the sand. Swimming under the ship it is possible to identify all the details of the deck and superstructures. In a few places the wooden upper deck is still very well preserved. Swimming towards the bow there are the remains of the two main masts and other

superstructure. The angle reduces toward the point where the ship is broken after the second bow turret. On both sides the six single 105 mm guns are clearly visible. Through the hole in the bow it is possible to see the details of the many different deck levels among these, on the bottom are the shells for the 305mm(12") guns.

The survey conducted by the previous expeditions had led to some doubts about the events surrounding the sinking of the Szent Istvan. Including the break in the bow there were another three obvious holes. Looking from bow to stern you had the first hole near the bow smaller than the other three and caused by the impact with the seabed. Then you had three larger holes that are funnel-shaped, penetrating into the ship's armour about two meters and with a width that changes from 13m to 9m and about 4m height. It was possible to see the longitudinal bulkheads inside these holes. The second hole was between the two funnels, as Rizzo described the explosion of the first torpedo that he'd fired. The third hole is also very big and between the second funnel and the stern mast, again like in Rizzo's report. The most curious is the fourth one, nearly under the first stern turret. Even though it has the same shape as the others, it is considerably smaller. The arguments about this hole took up most of the debate during the expedition. In fact, it was very difficult to find an explanation unless you look at the events at dawn on 10th June 1918.



Rizzo and Aonzo reported that during their infiltration into the Austro-Hungarian fleet in the half-light of dawn. If we consider the conditions in the half-light of dawn and the fact that the Szent Istvan and the Tegetthof were some 500m away then it is possible that the fourth hole in the wreck was caused by one of the two torpedoes fired by Aonzo, and that the explosion he saw on the Tegetthof, was actually the stern of the Szent Istvan maybe at an angle. This would mean that the Tegetthof wasn't hit and the three explosions recorded by both the Italian and Austrian records were all against the Szent Istvan. This is only one theory and needs further investigation with the official historic version.

***Fabio Ruberti***