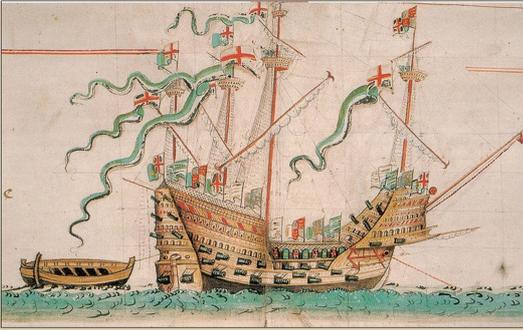


# Briefing Notes – Historic Shipwrecks

Presented by Russell Twomey

## The Mary Rose 1545



After ascending the throne in 1509, Henry VIII recognised the need for rebuilding the neglected English Navy. His first priority was to order the construction of two large warships, the Peter Pomegranate (named for his wife Catherine's Royal House of Aragon coat of arms) and the Mary Rose, named for his sister Mary and the House of Tudor emblem, the rose.

Mary Rose used 600 oak trees in her construction and was launched at Portsmouth July 1511 and then rigged on the River Thames. It didn't take long for her to enter battle, fighting over in Brittany in 1512 & 1513, the very first naval battle where two ships directly engaged each other using cannons.

In July 1520 Mary Rose was used to convey Henry VIII over to France for a meeting with King Francis I to celebrate a peace treaty between the two countries, a 16 day party known as "The Fields of Gold" where each tried to outdo the other with excesses of statesmanship. The peace lasted only 2 years.

Up until 1545, Mary Rose was laid up, however a significant make-over was undertaken in 1535 where additional decks were added and more cannons installed. This was later attributed as a major factor in the disaster that overtook her in battle a short time later.

In 1545 the French assembled a navy of around 150 warships, intent on invading England. They chose the Solent as the battleground, and the English sent out a fleet of 80 ships to defeat the French, with Mary Rose in the lead. It is believed that having fired a broadside, the vessel turned sharply to fire a salvo from her other side but was caught in a strong breeze and being top-heavy, she was forced to heel too far over and the lower level of open gun-ports were quickly swamped, filling the vessel. She was sailed towards a sandbank in hopes of saving the vessel but soon sank, her uppermost masts and spars still evident above water. Of the approximately 700 manning the ship, only 35 crew managed to survive. The majority were either trapped below decks by loose equipment rolling across the decks, or caught beneath the netting covering the open decks which was intended to prevent the enemy boarding.

After several unsuccessful attempts to salvage the Mary Rose, and after recovery of some of her equipment, the ship lay forgotten until 1836 when some fishermen caught their nets on her remains, and having identified her, used divers to try salvaging her remains. Unfortunately their attempts included using explosives which only served to destroy more of her remains.

Again in 1966 her remains were identified and attempts made to raise what was still left of the historic vessel, but with some political in-fighting and other challenges, it wasn't until 1982 that the Mary Rose was hauled to the surface in front of a TV audience estimated in the millions. Over the next two decades work was undertaken to preserve what remained of her, and over 26,000 separate items, and 179 separate skeletons were recovered for preservation, giving a valuable insight into life during the reign of Henry VIII.

In 2013 a new exhibition hall in Portsmouth was opened to house her, close by the HMS Victory and HMS Warrior.

## Vasa Today



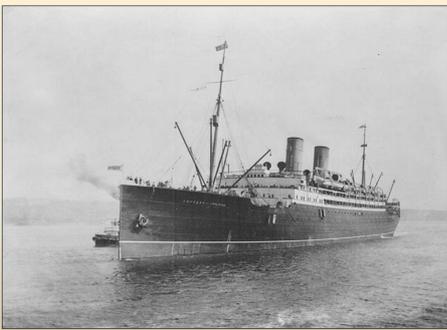
Whilst away from Sweden in 1626 fighting wars to expand his empire in Poland and Lithuania, King Gustavus Adolphus ordered the construction of a new, larger and more powerful naval vessel, the Vasa. The contract was awarded to Dutch shipbuilding engineers who became very concerned with the plans that the King had drawn up, the more so after he continuously sent back to Stockholm adjustments to the original design that clearly showed the vessel to be top heavy. To demonstrate their concern, the engineers had 30 workers run across from one side of the upper deck to the other causing the very to sway to a dangerous angle. Made aware of the results,, the King chose to ignore advice and continued to make further adjustments to the design to carry even more cannons onboard.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> August 1628, in fine weather thousands of residents of Stockholm gathered around the shores of the harbour to cheer the new vessel on as she set out on her triumphant maiden voyage. After a short journey of 1.3 kilometres, a sudden gust of wind caused the Vasa to heel over. Unfortunately the lower deck gun ports were open in preparation for firing a salute for the onlookers, water rushed into the vessel and she immediately sank approximately 120 metres from the shoreline. Many of the crew managed to scramble up the rigging still above the surface, but sadly 30 crew drowned. Others onshore rushed out to assist in the rescue survivors.

Immediately after the disaster, King Gustavus Adolphus ordered an inquest, attempting to lay blame at the feet of the shipwrights, however the evidence clearly pointed towards the King's constant interference with the design, resulting in an official determination that no one was to blame for the loss of this prestigious symbol of Sweden's naval might.

During the mid-1950's interest in recovering the Vasa saw her well preserved remains prepared for lifting to the surface, an event that finally occurred in April 1961. Due to heavy pollution in Stockholm waters, the harmful organisms that would normally have destroyed her timbers could not survive and therefore Vasa was in reasonable condition for restoration, a process that took 17 years to complete. She is now housed in her own dedicated museum beside Stockholm Harbour.

### RMS Empress of Ireland - May 1914



PA - Library & Archives Canada

Overshadowed by the Titanic disaster 2 years earlier, the incredible loss of life by those onboard the famous Canadian Pacific liner, Empress of Ireland hardly rated a mention in the global press. And yet, of the 1477 passengers and crew onboard 1012 went to a watery grave. Even more sad, only 4 of the 138 children, and 41 of 310 women onboard were saved.

In the early hours of 29<sup>th</sup> May 1914, the Empress of Ireland, bound for Liverpool UK from Quebec, was struck midships on her starboard by the Norwegian cargo ship Storstad. Both vessels had mis-read the reciprocal course each was appearing to hold as they both entered a fogbank. Empress of Ireland made a course adjustment to follow the usual course she took in this section of the St Lawrence estuary whilst Storstad also mis-interpreted the liner's course. Both vessels sounded their fog horns

in order to make the other aware of the proximity, and the Empress also came to a stop to wait improved visibility. Not long afterward, Storstad appeared at full speed on the Empress of Ireland's starboard side and embedded her bow both below and above the liner's waterline, instantly flooding passenger cabins on that side, many of which had their portholes open for fresh air.

Whilst Storstad only suffered minor damage to her bow, the liner started to heel over to starboard, trapping those in cabins on that side and making it impossible to launch starboard lifeboats. As she settled further over passengers on the port side scrambled to free themselves by climbing through open portholes.

Empress of Ireland went to her grave taking 71% of her passengers and crew with her. Storstad stood by to rescue those in the water, later assisted by two government vessels from the shore when alerted to the tragedy.

At the inquest, both companies blamed the other, however Lord Mersey found in favour of the owners of the Empress of Ireland, Canadian Pacific and awarded \$2 million in compensation. The owners of the Storstad mounted a counter-claim which was unsuccessful.

### SS Morro Castle - 1934



PD

The Morro Castle, owned by the American company Ward Line operated very popular 7 day cruises between New York and Havana, Cuba during the prohibition years of the 1930's. Even more popular was her very convivial captain Robert Willmott who enjoyed a strong following with regular passengers.

Prior to one voyage in September 1934, Willmott had expressed a distinct fear that he was going to die in a very short time. As the vessel set out on her return journey to New York, Captain Willmott was found dead in his cabin after his steward had entered to retrieve his dinner plate. A cause of death could not be determined and appeared highly unusual, but fulfilled his fears.

At 2:50am on the 8<sup>th</sup> September, the night before the Morro Castle was to arrive back in New York, a fire broke out in the 1<sup>st</sup> Class library and quickly engulfed the entire vessel due in part to neglect to head the vessel away from strong head winds, the failure of electrical systems and water pumps, and the lack of water hoses stored away due to a successful law suit from a passenger who had tripped over one on deck during a previous voyage. In addition, none of the crew had received emergency training onboard and were rendered incompetent to fight the fire. Seemingly, only the Radio Officer "Sparks Rodgers" had the sense to send out SOS calls as the ship burned.

With no directions from the temporary captain, Worms, the vessel continued to burn even as she beached herself at Asbury Park, a popular holiday resort area outside New York. Six lifeboats managed to get away with about 85 persons, but most had to jump from the ship and attempt to swim ashore. Many were picked up by nearby boats after a local radio station sent out an urgent request for assistance, but 137 passengers and crew lost their lives.

The vessel continued to burn for several days and quickly became a tourist attraction. Five months later Morro Castle was removed and dismantled.

Radio Officer Rodgers was hailed the hero of the disaster for remaining at his post and sending out requests for assistance, and quickly found a new calling travelling America undertaking public speaking engagements in halls and theatres for approximately \$1,000 a night. Because of his radio expertise he was engaged by the Bayonne Police Department to assist in implementing radios within their police car fleet. During this time he had a number of arguments with his supervisor, and when the supervisor lost both hands when opening a parcel on his desk, Rodgers was identified as the culprit and jailed.

During WW2 he was released to be conscripted into the army, and at war-end rented an apartment back in Bayonne, leading a very quiet life. He quickly came to prominence again when his next door neighbours, a father and adult daughter were found murdered in their apartment, it was discovered that Rodgers had been stealing money from them over a long period of time. Found guilty and once again in jail. Rodgers was diagnosed as a pyromaniac and psychopath, opening questions as to whether he was responsible for the fire onboard the Morro Castle to cover his tracks after murdering Captain Willmott and to make a hero of himself by standing by the ship's radio during the conflagration.

The manner in which the Morro Castle fire quickly became uncontrollable led the US government to ban the use of timber onboard American flagged vessels and addressed more stringent rules around crew emergency training.

### SS President Coolidge - 1942



One of two sister ships owned by the American-owned Dollar Line (later the American President Line), the President Coolidge ran a joint service with the President Hoover between the West Coast USA and Asia during the 1940's. With war clouds forming, both were used to repatriate Europeans away from Asia, and President Coolidge was also tasked with moving the US South West Command Headquarters to Melbourne in 1942.

In October 1942, President Coolidge embarked 5,340 troops and equipment in San Francisco and voyaged to an American Army Base established on the island of Santo, in what is now Vanuatu. Arriving off the entrance to the Segund Channel to berth at the town of Luganville, the merchant marine captain, Henry Nelson made the daring decision to enter harbour unaware that it had been protected with mines to prevent

attacks by lurking Japanese submarines.

Once inside the channel President Coolidge came in contact with two mines, one at the stern damaging the propellers, and the other near the engine room, killing one crewman. Now disabled, the captain made a quick decision to save the vessel and those onboard by running the ship up on a coral reef beside a beach, thus enabling her entire complement to disembark and wade ashore.

An army captain, Elwood Euart realising that there were several soldiers trapped in the ship's hold, returned to the vessel several times to bring them ashore. Unfortunately during his attempt to leave the ship after all others had, the Coolidge rolled over taking Captain Euart with her. His remains were retrieved from the easily accessible wreck in 2012 and after DNA verification were sent to his hometown in Rhode Island for burial with full military honours.

Today the President Coolidge remains one of the most popular and easily accessible shipwreck dive sites in the South Pacific.