

“The gold from the wrecks belongs to us and not to the state.”

Peter Lindberg, professional diver and treasure hunter

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It is the dream of the big money that primarily drives true treasure hunters, not idealism. So says diver and treasure hunter Peter Lindberg as American wreck seekers have found the British vessel HMS "Victory".

There are wreck seekers and there are wreck seekers, I belong to the category treasure hunters. That is, I look for wrecks because I stand to gain from it. The other category looks for wrecks for idealistic reasons. Where we share common ground is probably that our interest was awoken in our childhood. In kids books and movies there are numerous stories of wrecks with treasure chests guarded by octopuses, sharks and all sorts of strange sea monsters. No wonder most kids have played games where they found the big treasure.

Looking for wrecks that might be commercially viable doesn't have to mean that you are looking for a chest full of goldcoins from the 17thcentury. It could be a vessel carrying 3 000 tonnes of tin plates from World War II. Its worth is hundreds of millions (Swedish Kronor) but the wreck itself is not particularly exotic apart from the fact that it might have a dramatic story concerning its sinking that might be worth telling. Without its cargo of tin, the memory of the vessel would soon fade away, and the ship itself would vanish in a pile of rust. How about a really old wreck then, should you be allowed to salvage that too, if it has a cargo of tin plates, or perhaps a chest full of goldcoins? In my opinion –of course, if it is done with respect for the historical value of the vessel in question. But I have a hard time understanding something, why should some nations have exclusive rights to findings onboard or around these old wrecks? If I am looking for a 17thcentury wreck with gold in its cargo and if I find it in Swedish waters, all of the wreck, and its cargo goes to the state. No finders fee or sum of cash for enriching our state with more goldcoins for them to hide away in some storage room is paid out. Is that fair?

Looking for wrecks, you have to pay two prices. It takes a lot of time researching archives and summing all the data you find. This is done in your spare time when you should be spending time with your family. The other thing is the fact that it costs lots of money looking for wrecks. You have to have access to boats, search equipment, divers, staff, fuel, food etc. Once you find what you have been looking for, the struggle with authorities begins. They haven't had a thought about looking for just this wreck or even acknowledged its existence, but all the same, in their eyes we are supposed to just hand over all findings without any form of economical compensation. For some people, this is an equation that works just fine, they already have the means economically to waste these funds for purely ideological reasons. For others, like me, this is not an option, all we have is our own two hands and a sort of intellect attuned to just treasure seeking. Even if I, as a commercial salvor is interested in older wrecks without economical incitement, but for reasons previously mentioned I can't just look for these wrecks. A dream to me would be if you could combine the two different types of wreck seekers. A 17thcentury wreck in Swedish waters with valuable cargo could be shared between the state and the wreck finder, after a serious archeological examination and dig of the wreck has been done, financed by the valuable cargo.

What keeps one going even in the face of these obvious "obstacles"? This is a question that can't be answered in just a few sentences, or maybe not at all.

What makes people time and time again hurl themselves out of a fully functional airplane? The adrenaline, the rush, the adventure (a lust for death in my opinion). Us treasure hunters probably feel something similar. Building up a wreck project night after night, sitting with navigational charts and drawing lines for wind directions, landmarks, directions of currents, maybe a witness statement from an old fisherman. In the end you can mark the site with an X, or at least mark an area where you think the wreck might be in. Then the actual preparations for getting you ready to go outstarts. In some cases it might take years before getting the chance to get out there. Once you're out there you start to question your sanity, after days of boring search, sitting with aching eyes staring at a computer monitor that's only showing you a smooth muddy sea bed. But then! A minute before you have to finish up if you want to have enough fuel to take you home, or because you have finished your last banana, the wreck slowly slides into view on the monitor. A few, short seconds when you're out of breath, that might be likened to the parachute jump, and then a complete explosion of gargling sounds and the typical "LOOK, LOOK!"-comments repeated numerous times, and then the mind races, is it the right wreck or is it the wrong wreck. And just as soon as the wreck slipped onto the screen, it slips right back out again. Did we save the position? Did anyone save the monitor image? Chaos! WHAT-DEPTH-WAS-IT-AT, can we dive now or did we leave our gear on the dock? Afterwards, what you've been through feels like you brain has just been running a marathon.

Does anyone get rich looking after wrecks? YES! Bob Ballard for example, Titanics discoverer became mega-rich writing books, movie rights and so on, without ever taking a single thing from the wreck itself. There are a few others who have gotten rich in similar ways. Another way is to actually find a treasure. Mel Fisher spent 15 years looking for a wreck, a Spanish galleon, Atocha (abbreviated), off the coast of Florida. He lost a son who drowned in a capsized boat but he never gave up. In the end, he and his team found tons of gold and silver buried under the sand. Others have had similar finds and has even managed to salvage gold from over a thousand meters depth, and made a profit doing it! But most remains losers, the odds are as poor as stocks or gambling. Most people fail with their wreck projects, the wreck can't be found, or it's too deep to be salvagable, the cargo didn't consist of what they expected, trouble with the authorities or criminals and so on. The list of possible tribulations is endless. But still you keep going, if you have found a treasure once, you want to experience it again. For me personally, when the first bottle of champagne from the wreck Jönköping was opened. That feeling was amazing, pure euphoria.

The latest find that has been made is a British warship that disappeared in the English Channel with crew and everything during a storm in 1744. The American corporation Odysse Marine Exploration is hoping to find four metric tons of gold coins and a large number of bronze cannons. The value of a successful salvage and sale of this might be worth in the region of a billion Swedish Kronor (roughly \$150.000.000). But this is where their trouble with the British authorities starts, and they will claim ownership of this vessel. We probably haven't heard the last of this wreck finding. My own ongoing projects are more modest. True to habit, alcohol is still the way to go. Two wrecks are out there in the Gulf of Bothnia, one with 1 000 bottles of cognac and 300 bottles of brown liquor, the other with 1 680 bottles of champagne. The cognac wreck has been located, but it lies deep, at 90 meters, we have been searching for the other one for two summers now but still haven't found her. The next summer there is only one possible grid left to look in, so that's where she must be, naturally...

Peter Lindberg