MONROSA EXPEDITION 2011
A case study from the history of a famous shipwreck
(Final Copy April 2nd 2012)

THE EXPLORERS CLUB FLAG REPORT
MONROSA EXPEDITION 2011
June 10th – 30th 2011
Flag Number: 176
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Anavyssos, Greece

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Many events of contemporary history happened on the seas remains still today unknown, or partially known and should need proves and verifications to clarify, demonstrate or enforce this few knowledge or need to be discovered the historical truth connected with this events. Today knowledge about sea battle or important and dramatic sea accident of contemporary age are mainly based on official reports, sometimes still hidden in archives, or on stories of witnesses which judgement is most of the time doubtful or incomplete. Sometimes through the execution of an underwater archaeological survey to study a contemporary shipwreck related with important contemporary historical facts, it is possible to find proofs and findings to support and help the reconstruction of the events of the sinking. An aspect not to undervalue is the video documentation of contemporary wreck sites, this is important for the archaeological survey in order to understand the sinking reasons, the impact with the seabed and the related damages. Furthermore, it is possible to identify objects and environments that could help to reconstruct the life aboard, both of sailors and officers. After the restoration these objects can give a realistic image of the life aboard and of the methods of sea fighting of that period, in the case of war ships, illustrating the type of society and the military, economic and social history of a country. For those reasons and more the study of wrecks of important ships of contemporary age is rightfully part of underwater archaeology as well as the industrial archaeology is part of archaeology.

Historical Background

During WWII Italy attacked Greece on October 28th 1940 in order to have free passage for her shipping in the Greek waters. The campaign resulted in a failure due to the strong Greek resistance and in the spring of the following year Hitler decided to invade Balkans to relief the Italian Expedition Corp fighting against the Greeks on the Epiro Mountains.

The Balkan Blitz Krieg easily overcomes the Yugoslavian and Greek resistance and the Germans soon joined the Italian forces in Greece mainland. On April 27th the 2nd and the 5th Panzer Division victoriously entered in Athens raising the 3rd Reich flag on the Acropolis.

Only the Greek island of Crete was resisting with the remains of the Greek Army together with a strong Anglo-Australian Expeditionary Force. This island was a strategic fortress and its conquer was necessary to control all the sea routes in the Eastern Mediterranean.
The Germans decided to invade Crete by air using the XI Flieger Korps and its conquer became the
greatest air assault using parachutists and gliders. The airfields and airports of Rethymno, Maleme
and Heraklion were taken by the “Green Devils” in bloody fighting and all the island fall in German
hands between May 20th and June 1st 1941. The Italians reinforced the German parachutists with sea
transported troops. The operation, codenamed “Merkur” entered as a legend in the history of
airborne troops. As soon the battle finished begun the shipping to reinforce and supply the Cretan
garrison and the Italian Navy was in charge of this duty. On the morning of 25th October 1941 the
steamer Monrosa was in Piraeus harbour embarking men, supply and quadrupeds of the Italian
Army division “Siena”.

The Monrosa

The Monrosa was a steamer of 6703 tls, 130 meters of length, built in 1920 at J. Coughlan & Sons
shipyards in Vancouver (Canada). Her first name was Indus and the first owner was the
Swedish East Asia Company (SEAC). In 1923 was sold to E. Cesano & Co (Italy) and
renamed Indiano. Few years later, in 1925, was purchased by the Società Anonima
Navigazione Alta Italia of Genova (Italy), her identification number was 1168. The company was propriety of the
powerful Piaggio family, had the officies downtown Genova, in via XX Settembre and
was one of the most important capitalist family of Italy at that time. The Monrosa
was used on the main routes serviced by the company, in particular on the busy one on the one of
the Gulf of Mexico, on the line using the ports of New Orleans, Houston, Tampa, Pensacola,
Galveston and sometimes Bay Town, Jacksonville e Newport News (near by Norfolk). On
November 8th 1940 the Monrosa was confiscated by the Regia Marina (Italian Royal Navy) to be
used on military duties during the war. After one year of service to transport men and materials along the Mediterranean on the 25\textsuperscript{th} October 1941 she is in the Piraeus harbour embarking men and quadrupeds of the Italian Army infantry division “Siena” to reinforce the German Italian garrison of Creta.

**The sinking**

The research started in Rome at the Archivio Storico Marina Militare (Historical Archive Italian Navy) searching for all documents involving the facts that lead to the Monrosa sunk. Everything connected with these facts was found, describing the sinking even in the most detailed aspects. We understand all about the dynamic of the sea fight thanks to the numerous witnesses of Italian naval units and Germans aircrafts presents during the action. Mainly thanks to the official Italian Navy report number 2779 issued on October 30\textsuperscript{th} 1941 by Marisudest (Italian Navy HQ south-east Mediterranean). The Monrosa left the Piraeus harbour together the companion steamer S. Agata and escorted by destroyer Sella, MTB Sirio and one aircraft for air attack protection. The convoy was heading on safety route for 142°. At 13,18 took place a submarine attack, while the convoy was crossing the steamer Fanny escorted by MTB Libra coming from Leros Island and that were sailing from the opposite direction, from south to north. The escort aircraft was the first to launch the alarm and attacked the submerged submarine with its bombs and machine-guns. The attack was without effect since few second later the Monrosa was hit by a torpedo, may be two. The antisubmarine chase begun with the Sella launching 19 depth charges in the place were the aircraft drop its bombs. A big air bubble was seen emerged meaning that something was hitting the submarine as well. Following the boilers explosion the Monrosa was sinking rapidly by the stern, as showed clearly by an aerial picture found in the archives. Meanwhile the submarine chase
was going on with the launch of seven more depth charges followed by two others big bubbles and plenty of oil coming up from the depths. Also MTB Sirio joined the launch of depth charges together with some German Stukas flying to Crete that attacked dropping bombs. The defender thought that at the end of the fight also the attacking submarine was sunk due to the signs appeared to the surface. The research followed in London at the National Archives, the submarine that sunk the Monrosa was the HMS Triumph. She didn’t sink during the fight, but succeeded to reach badly damaged with some wounded aboard Alexandria of Egypt nine days later. Of the 265 men aboard the Monrosa, 167 were rescued while 148 hands were lost. In the various report (Italian Navy – Regia Marina, Italian Air Force – Regia Aeronautica and German Air Force - Luftwaffe) the exact place of sinking was slightly different.

The Expedition

Preparation was intense, not only on archive research, but on training to dive at 90 meters in wrecks as well. Few days before the departures the Explorer Flag N° 176 arrived and we had the honour to carry the flag with us in the expedition. The Italian team reunited at the harbour of Ancona (Italy) to take the ferry to Greece. At the night of the following day we arrived at our base in Anavyssos (Greece). The day after we reunited with the Greek team and was devoted to organization, preparation of equipment briefings and diving duties assignment. We were using in this expedition the most technological equipment. Bottom diving teams were equipped with 9 electronic close circuit rebreathers (ECCR), support and safety teams with open circuit scuba equipment (OCS). The wreck supposed to be Monrosa one were been located already by the Greek team and our task was to positively identify as Monrosa one with means of
measurements, recognition of ship type and signs of sinking that were confirming the report found in archives. We performed a training dive on a similar wreck but only 35 meters depth to test the equipment and the divers training, refreshing the emergency procedures as well. We performed six dives on the wrecks that fully confirmed to be the Monrosa one. The wreck was lying on the bottom perfectly in sailing position with the upper deck at about 80 meters depth and the on the bottom at 95 meters depth. The bow was heading south and there was a huge damage at the right side of the stern with boilers laying outside the wreck. This was confirming the dynamic of the battle and of the sinking. We were not able to find the ship bell because the deck was badly damaged and collapsed, but all the measures and shape of the wreck was exactly the same of the Monrosa, so absolutely no doubts were left. The dives organization was based on two bottom divers teams and one support and safety team. One divers boat and one emergency high speed rubber boat (70 knots).

The diving procedure consisted in one shot line (descending and ascending line) with spare decompression bottles on it and a detachable decompression station formed by bars at different deco stops depths. Two in water safety divers and two stand by safety divers. The emergency high speed rubber boat was equipped with fully first aid and oxygen system and the paramedic team member. We did not experience any problem during the exploration dives. All our dive were been documented by two photographer and one video operator that covered all the shipwreck survey. We donated our documentation to the Italian Navy archives.
and to the expeditions members was awarded a prize by the Italian Navy Sailors Association. We supposed to have accomplished all the Monrosa Expeditions task and goals.

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