

Return to the U-166

A science expedition recently explored the remains of the only World War II German U-boat, U-166, sunk in the Northern Gulf of Mexico. The U-166 was discovered in 5,000 feet of water in 2001 while C & C Technologies, Inc. was conducting a pipeline survey with their HUGIN 3000 Autonomous Underwater Vehicle (AUV) for BP and Shell International. The 2003 expedition was supported by the NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration, C & C Technologies, the PAST Foundation, and the Minerals Management Service (MMS), with ROV (Remote Operated Vehicle) support provided by Sonsub, Inc. A crew from the New York film company, KPI, joined the science team to film a documentary for the History Channel's "Deep Sea Detective Series".

The goal of the project was to document the archaeological and microbiological aspects of the U-boat site using state-of-the-art positioning systems, digital still and video imagery, and limited microbiological experiments. The project utilised a Sonsub Innovator ROV for the project, onboard the NOAA Research Vessel Ronald H. Brown. A survey team from C & C Technologies, Inc. tracked the ROV acoustically using a Long Base Line (LBL) positioning array of five transponders set on the seafloor in conjunction with their C-Nav GPS. The accuracy achieved during the survey provided as little as six centimetres of horizontal deviation for the position of the ROV.

The team also investigated the shipwreck site, SS Robert E. Lee. This passenger freighter was the last victim of the U-166 and lies on the seafloor within a mile of the U-boat. The team paused from their work to conduct a wreath-laying ceremony at the sites of the two vessels to honour those lost sixty-one years ago on that tragic page of history.

In addition to the ROV investigation, C & C's R/V Rig Supporter arrived at the site and conducted an AUV survey of the shipwrecks to support the project. The 2003 U-166 project represents the deepest comprehensive archaeological survey conducted in the Gulf of Mexico to date. A presentation on the techniques and preliminary findings of the project are planned for the 2004 Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) Conference in St. Louis and Underwater Intervention (UI) Conference in New Orleans. The History Channel's "Deep Sea Detective Series" documentary is scheduled to be broadcast in April 2004.

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