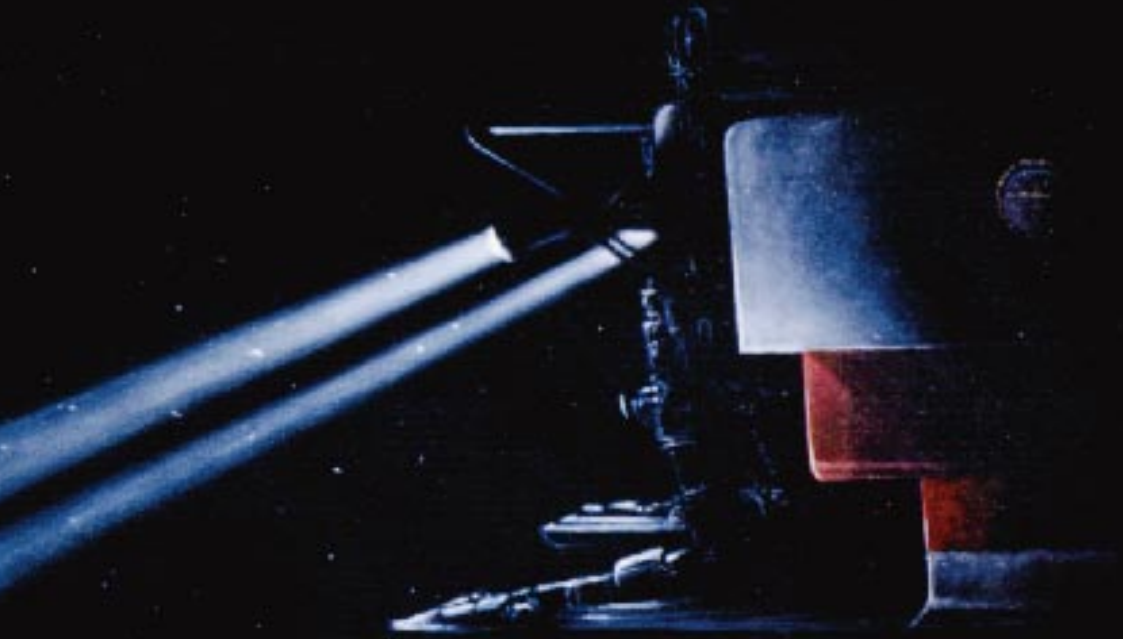


Yorktown Revisited

By DM1 (AW/PJ) Erick M. Murray



As the sun set on 4 June 1942, planes from Yorktown (CV 5), Enterprise (CV 6) and Hornet (CV 8) had succeeded against the odds and sunk four Japanese carriers in defense of Midway Island in the central Pacific Ocean. This devastating blow dealt to the enemy's air power in the Battle of Midway would later be recognized as a turning point in the war in the Pacific. But this gain was not without cost. During the battle Yorktown was disabled by two torpedo hits on her port side. Dead in the water, her list increasing and capsizing imminent, the captain

ordered the crew to abandon ship. However, the carrier remained afloat; she was placed under tow and a salvage party was put aboard. But on 6 June she received a final, mortal blow as she was struck by two torpedoes fired by a Japanese submarine. In the early morning of 7 June, Yorktown finally gave up the fight and sank. In May 1998 a National Geographic-sponsored expedition, led by Dr. Robert Ballard, set out from Midway Island in an attempt to locate this piece of our nation's past, whose final resting place had been a mystery for almost 56 years.

As the salvage ship *Laney Chouest* departed Midway Island to begin the search for the remains of *Yorktown* (CV 5), the famed WW II aircraft carrier sunk on 7 June 1942 during the Battle of Midway, there was an almost palpable excitement in the air. The ship bustled with people: support staff for the salvage ship

DM1 Murray's painting captures on canvas the discovery of the long-lost remains of *Yorktown* by the remote-controlled submersible.

and the deep-submergence vehicle she would deploy; members of Dr. Ballard's team; and photographers, writers and a film crew. I was thrilled to be among them, having

been assigned as a Navy artist to document the Navy's involvement in the operation for the Navy Art Collection Branch of the Naval Historical Center. I knew this would be the trip of a lifetime. And I would soon meet one passenger who would make the journey even more unforgettable.



Counterclockwise from left, *Laney Chouest* carried the expedition team on its search for *Yorktown*. The Advanced Tethered Vehicle, operated by the Navy's Deep Submergence Unit, San Diego, Calif., journeyed to the ocean bottom to investigate suspected wreck sites that had been identified by earlier sonar sweeps. *Yorktown* veteran Bill Surgi helped search the sonar display, on which the ship's remains would only appear as large as a line drawn on the yellow note on the computer monitor. Surgi, left, was the only representative of the carrier's crew during the expedition, led by Dr. Robert Ballard, right. On 19 May the mystery of *Yorktown's* location was solved when her final resting place, three miles below the surface, was located.



Photos courtesy Bill Surgi



I didn't know who my roommate would be when I located my stateroom aboard *Laney Chouest*, but as I unpacked my suitcase and sea bag I got an indication that he might be an interesting character. In a shadowed corner of the bottom bunk, a ray of reflected light caught the sharp edge of an object which, I realized upon closer inspection, was a dark green, metal doughboy helmet. When I finally met my bunkmate, Bill Surgi, the reason for its presence became clear: this was the helmet he was wearing aboard *Yorktown* when the crew had abandoned the stricken carrier. Now, almost 56 years after he last laid eyes on his carrier, he was hoping to see her again through the eyes of the Advanced Tethered Vehicle (ATV).

Each time the ATV was deployed

to examine a suspected wreckage site, we couldn't help but be excited that this could be the one, the journey that would reveal the ship that had not been seen by human eyes in so long. Each time we seemed to be close to finding her Surgi would retrieve his helmet and don his dungarees, preparing himself in battle dress for the moment that the video screens might finally display the image of his old, proud vessel. Each time, mechanical failure, weather and other frustrating, unexpected delays would send us red



eyed and mind weary back to whatever we did to pass the time. Many of us kept journals. Most sent e-mail back to commands, loved ones or friends. Eating, sleeping, or watching movies—anything to relieve the tension from the roller coaster of

heightened anticipation.

After a successful early morning launch on 19 May, the ATV reached the sea floor and was heading in the direction of another suspected wreckage location. Past disappointments tinged our hope as we watched the seemingly endless, flat, sandy bottom of the Pacific pass under the searching lenses of the submersible. Surgi sat patiently with his helmet and camera in hand, his dungarees tucked into his boots. The look on his face spoke of a thousand



David Doubilet © National Geographic Society

memories. Occasionally, most of us would leave the room and meander about the ship, then return to stare blankly at the screen. But Surgi was looking intently into the image of the ocean floor while the view from the remote camera traveled slowly forward, as if willing the ship to come into view.

Suddenly, something shiny appeared half buried in the sand, illuminated by the powerful lights of the ATV. Then our view was filled by a massive hulk. Bill Surgi nearly came to full attention, half sitting

and half standing, and said, "That's her . . . that's my ship!" Though we couldn't immediately see anything to confirm it, he knew it was *Yorktown*—and of course, he was right. As the ATV glided slowly over the wreckage, the flight deck and the side gun mounts were in clear view. The bridge and entire island structure were beautifully intact. Seeing the hull number on the port bow was an especially exciting moment. The discovery made everyone feel special and strangely privileged, accompanied by an overwhelming and

humbling sense of awe.

Later, in a ceremony on the bow, Bill Surgi gave an emotional speech that nearly caused our tears to flow as freely as his. He spoke about when the ship was struck, then struck again, and how he had to leave all he had aboard the sinking carrier. He spoke about his shipmates who didn't make it, and the ones who survived the war. As he told of his wartime experiences, he wore the helmet I had noticed on his bunk that first day. When he spoke of times of peace, he switched covers and wore a traditional Dixie cup. I was honored to act as his hat bearer during this gathering. As he said his final words, he sprinkled delicate flower petals upon the waters at the site.

As we debarked *Laney Chouest* at Midway Island for the trip back home, I reflected on the expedition. I had expected a grand adventure, and I wasn't disappointed. Being part of such a historic discovery was the highlight of my 18-year Navy career. But this experience was even more awesome because I was able to view it through the eyes of Bill Surgi, who had "lived" some of *Yorktown's* history. ✈

Petty Officer Murray detached from the Naval Historical Center in August for his next assignment aboard *Enterprise* (CVN 65).

Going "Home"—56 Years Later

By Bill Surgi

Fifty-six years after I left the stricken carrier *Yorktown* (CV 5), I enjoyed the privilege of being included on the expedition to locate her remains. The amazing search effort found her sitting upright on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, three miles below the surface, halfway buried in the ocean bottom. From our vantage point aboard *Laney Chouest*, we could see that the carrier is remarkably clean—free of barnacles, silt and other contamination—and her stack

is still intact. The flight deck has been broken off aft of the #3 elevator, and all of the elevators are in the down position.

The submersible crew was very accommodating to me during their search with the Advanced Tethered Vehicle (ATV). They asked me what I wanted to see and, if they could, showed it to me. I asked to see the torpedo holes, as I had been



Courtesy Bill Surgi

Surgi constructed mementos for expedition participants; note the decorated styrofoam cups in the background, which descended to the wreck site and returned as miniature collectibles.

Courtesy Bill Surgi

on the catwalk above them when the weapons struck. The catwalk was gone, but the holes were certainly visible! I wanted to see the mural on the wall behind the #2 elevator, and even though the crew could not tilt the cameras enough to get a full view, we were able to see that it is still there. We could also see the mechanism of the elevator guardrails, still in the down position. It appeared that the wooden deck was still intact. I also saw the 1.1 mounts forward and the Fighter Squadron 42 ready room where I took my third-class petty officer test.

I was proud to be the sole representative of the *Yorktown* crew, and took it upon myself to make some



Surgi decorated several eggs with the *Yorktown* logo for a visit to the wreck site. Thanks to nature's engineering, they returned intact, allowing him to enjoy the last meal from *Yorktown*.

souvenirs of the expedition to present to its participants. I felt it was important to express the gratitude of CV 5 survivors for the efforts in locating our ship.

I painted about 200 Styrofoam cups with a three-color CV 5 logo and information about the expedition, then Dr. Ballard and I signed them. Whenever the ATV went down to the *Yorktown* site, I filled a laundry bag with these cups and attached it to the outside of the submersible. At the surface, the cups were four inches high; when they returned from the depths, they were the size of a whiskey jigger, about one and a half inches high.

Amazingly, the information on them was still readable and the colors clear. I presented cups to the spon-

sors of the expedition, to museums and to special people, including many of the *Yorktown* survivors and the *Naval Aviation News* staff.

Another remembrance of the expedition was even more personal. I had eaten many meals aboard *Yorktown* during the war, but none was as significant as the one I enjoyed on 25 May 1998. I had decorated the shells of three raw eggs in the same manner as the cups and sent them down with the ATV. Luckily, they also returned intact! After carefully blowing out the insides, I enjoyed the most unique meal of scrambled eggs imaginable. I now have the commemorative eggshells to remind me of the day I consumed the last meal from *Yorktown*, my "home" during WW II—more than half a century later. ✈

Bill Surgi served as an Aviation Machinist's Mate Third Class aboard *Yorktown*, and is the founder of the Battle of the Coral Sea Association.



Members of the *Yorktown* crew struggle to repair the damage from the first of several bomb hits during the Battle of Midway. *Yorktown* was disabled by two torpedo strikes later the same day, and suffered a mortal blow from two more torpedoes two days later. Inset, DM1 Murray captured Bill Surgi in a contemplative moment during the search for *Yorktown*'s remains.