

polly tapson

What inspired you to mount an expedition on the Lusitania?

“First, I like a challenge. I’m fairly realistic about the likelihood of success of anything that I take on. If I had enough time and money to set-up a visit to the Titanic, I might take it on, but the Lusitania looked quite viable. It could be reached with open circuit and was fairly near to us.

The Lusitania was more than just a challenging dive however. It has a fascinating and controversial history that drew us into it. I haven’t met anyone seriously interested in the Lusitania that didn’t become obsessed with it. There are just so many riddles to unravel that it takes determination and a focus bordering on obsession to get to the bottom of it.”

KEY WEST WRECKERS

CONTINUED

waged verbal war on materialism and other evils that tempted men into “the good life,” the preacher descended to the central aisle, pointing his finger

and talking his way to the back of the church where its huge, double doors overlooked the ocean. Parishioners followed the preacher’s every motion,

Thirty one year old filmmaker and British wrecker, Polly Tapson, led the first technical diving expedition to the Lusitania in 94JUN.

How long did it take to plan and train for the expedition?

I began to ask people if they would commit to the training and the cost of the expedition about 18 months to two years before we dived. That was more than enough lead time to actually set up the expedition. One factor was that the UK members of the team were not trained in the use of trimix and had very little knowledge of gas mixing and the implications of this kind of technical diving at that time. Four months out, I knew exactly what we were going to do and what contingencies were available. We were meeting on a regular basis to discuss how to improve what had been planned.

How many dives did you do in preparation for the dive?

We scheduled 49 dives in preparation for the Lusitania. We were going out every other weekend last winter. We conducted a lot of the deep training in a close controlled environmental quarry in North Wales. The UK team trained in excess of 90 meters/293 f because we didn't want the Lusitania to be the team's deepest dive when we arrived in Ireland. We needed to test everything.

How important was diver safety in your planning?

A great deal of thought went into our what ifs and what thens. I would stay up til 3:00 in the morning contemplating what could happen and how we would deal with it. We agreed as a team was to ban any form of competitiveness and encourage discussion. As a result our post dive briefings became incredibly honest.

Did the expedition come out as you had planned?

Yes in every way. It was a perfect execution of our plan, right down to the number of vegetarian meals in the packed lunches. We could have spent more money to hire assistants to help with the gas mixing or to help with unloading the boat, but we decided not to. It was hard work. We got up early. We worked through the morning setting everything up. Everyone had a designated task. We worked very well as a team. Of course, I didn't really have a great sense of relief until after the last day's diving when I knew that it had been an incident-free trip.

Technical diving appears to be predominantly a male bastion. Did you find that being a woman was ever an issue?

I don't have anything to say on that subject. The answer is no. It was never an issue. I have encountered sexist attitudes from some men along the way but nothing I couldn't handle. Most of the Lusitania team were intelligent enough to be above it. Though I did think that your art spread in HARD (aquaCorps Journal, N8, HARDCORE) was completely offensive and I'm not alone.

You did?

I don't like anything that suggests violence to woman. Perhaps you should have the mechanical hand grabbing a man's penis instead of a breast. Then you would see what I mean.

Fair enough. It seems that technical diving has a lot fewer women than recreational diving as a whole (about 37% female according to PADI statistics). Our surveys suggest it's 5% or less. Can you offer any insights as to why that is?

It has more to do with perception more than reality. Men probably find the sport easier than women because of the equipment and intensive nature of technical diving. However, having said that, I've seen men who are not particularly strong who are able to wheel some heavy equipment. I believe that women can overcome what might be perceived to be a physical lack of strength if it's something that they really want to do.

I understand that you got "bent" on a practice run a week prior to the expedition. That must have been a very difficult personal decision for you to decide to carry on anyway. Are you comfortable talking about it?

I don't like talking about it or discussing it in much detail for a very obvious reason. People are going to read this and there is no guarantee of how they're going to interpret what I have to say. What I don't want to do is to be an example of someone who acted irresponsibly and got away with it. And then have someone else do the same thing who subsequently ends up in a wheelchair for life. It is very difficult for me to talk about it for that reason.

It was obviously a very personal decision on your part. You had worked on the project for 2 years.

Yes, of course it was a personal decision. I believed that my recovery was totally satisfactory in so much that I was not going to cancel that trip. That's not to say that I intended to dive. I reserved that decision for the trip. However, I definitely was not going to let it stop the wheels that were in motion, the imminent arrival of the American divers

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then glanced down in shame and guilt when he locked eyes with them. Indeed, this pleased the preacher.

Then, with all the power of God vested in him, and with the

absolute authority of the devil himself, the preacher threw off his holy robe and raced through the church portals crying "wreck ashore."



and everything that had been planned.

Cave divers have a saying, “Take only pictures, leave only bubbles.” I know that doesn’t really apply to a lot of shipwreck diving, but your team decided not to take artifacts off the Lusitania. What was your motivation?

It’s very simple really. There is a man who claims he owns the Lusitania and told us that we weren’t allowed to visit the shipwreck. His claim has yet to be proven. But the maritime and merchant marine laws were such that I felt that no laws were being broken in visiting the shipwreck which is why we were able to proceed unhindered. In addition, we were visited by the Irish Customs and Excise people and informed that if we recovered anything from the Lusitania, we would have to hand it over to Customs. As a result, we felt that there was a certain risk in recovering anything from the ship and so we decided not to take that risk. (It was later reported that some team members removed artifacts. See “Who owns the Lusey,” Pg 36—ed.)

What would you say are the frontiers today in shipwreck diving?

I don’t think there are really any frontiers.

Explain what you mean.

The limits are more a matter of economics than anything else. Unless there is a promise of great gain, progress will be relatively slow. I see the most potential for progress being made in commercial and scientific diving. Recreational divers will hang onto their coat tails as far as they can go. It’s an expensive sport.

How much did it cost to mount the expedition, the training, planning the whole thing?

By the time I had finished pulling in “deals”, the financial costs were viable for everyone who I wanted to be involved, but the indirect costs of our time and relationships were higher than anticipated. Everyone agrees that their contribution in man-hours was excessive and cannot be adequately quantified. This was largely due to the learning curve we had to climb as a team and taking the what if/what then approach to planning. One of our team reckoned it personally cost him in the range of £10,000 (About US \$15,000—ed.) hard cash to prepare and participate in the expedition.

What are your personal exploration goals over the next 18 months?

My goals are to identify several virgin wrecks beyond 70 m/228 m off the southwest coast of England. We have the coordinates and we’ll be diving them on mix. Another member of the team is handling the organizational side of the expedition because of the time involved. I have professional commitments and other affairs which are my priority for the time being.