



The dive team landing on the stern of the wreck



Pim De Roodes on the entrance door of the admirals room



The big canon pointing to the surface at 91m depth

ADMIRAL TRYON'S BLUNDER

> WHEN ADMIRAL TRYON ORDERED TO POSITION BOTH MIGHTY WAR VESSELS VICTORIA AND CAMPERDOWN IN A COLLISION COURSE, HE MADE A HUGE MISTAKE. SO HUGE THAT IT COST THE LIVES OF MORE THAN 350 CREW MEMBERS. THE VICTORIA NOW IS THE ONLY SHIP WRECK WORLDWIDE POSITIONED VERTICALLY ON THE SEABED.

: VIC VERLINDEN

22 June 1893 Standing on the bridge of his flags-ship HMS *Victoria*, Admiral Tryon was the Commander of the biggest battleships of the biggest Marine/Navy worldwide. With Lebanon's Tripoli coastline already in view, the Admiral ordered his fleet to turn around. At a distance of approximately 1100 metres, the other battleship *Camperdown* was positioned next to HMS *Victoria*. According to the Admiral's order, the two vessels would have to make an inward turn before being able to turn around. *Camperdown's* commanding Officer Admiral Markham advised the Admiral that the distance between the two ships was not sufficient to perform this

manoeuvre safely – the turning circle of both ships at least had to be two (2) kilometres in order to avoid a collision. In the Royal Navy one should never doubt an order given by an Officer higher in rank. Admiral Markham, in charge of the *Camperdown*, doubted the given order, signalled over by flags, so much that he didn't obey it. Not until Admiral Tryon signalled "What are we waiting for?!" that Markham had no other choice but to obey his superior's command. The order was given to turn around the rudder/wheel 180 degrees.

The Collision The two vessels, each weighing 10,000 tons, were now turning

towards each other at a speed of 9 knots. For several Officers-in-command it became crystal clear a collision was unavoidable. Captain Bourke again hinted to Admiral Tryon that they had moved too close to the *Camperdown* for the manoeuvre to be executed. However, the Admiral proceeded with the manoeuvre as planned. The combined speed of both flagships was 18 knots so their distance decreased quickly. In the minutes following, Bourke twice warned Admiral Tryon that they would get too close to the *Camperdown*. When Tryon finally realised a collision was unavoidable, it was too late. The Admiral frantically ordered both propellers to be



Admiral Tryon failed to acknowledge the flaws in his instructions to turn both the ships until it was too late; collision was inevitable and the impetus resulted in the HMS being driven vertically into the seabed



Left to right: Adjusting the camera on the Kirby Morgan helmet; Loading the boat in the harbour of Beirut; Erik Wouters preparing his stages before the dive

Below: French newspaper 1893; HMS Victoria leaving the harbour



Above: The film team working on the outside of the wreck

switched to "reverse", but both vessels were moving too fast. The First Chief (steerman) pushed the telegraph into full reverse; at the same time the process of reversing the propellers – driven by 14,000 horsepower – got the 'green light' in the engine room. The distance between both ships was now only a few hundred metres and nothing could be done to avoid a collision. Only the counterthrust of the reversing propellers could slightly slow down their speed. Meanwhile, the *Camperdown* had gotten so close that the Officers standing on her bridge became visible. A few moments later the *Camperdown's* bow hit the starboard side of the *Victoria*; its hardened steel ram ripped into the hull in the area of the coal bunker; the Officers' quarters were crushed instantly. The devastating impact was like an earthquake within the ship.

Sunken On the *Camperdown* the order was given to reverse the propellers; slowly but surely the flagship pulled away. The enormous gap in the hull of the *Victoria* meant the vessel rapidly made water and her bow began to sink. Water also flooded the ship through the portholes, which had earlier been opened due to the warm weather conditions. Within a few minutes the ship's bow disappeared beneath the surface and the still-working propellers lifted out of the water. Anyone able to do so jumped overboard but had to try not to be sucked down with the ship or crushed by the propellers. Hundreds of crew members

were trapped in the hull while the ship, now vertical, sank into the deep, her propellers still thudding. Crews on the other battleships watched everything in total bewilderment and tried to rescue survivors from the water. "It's all my fault" were the last words Admiral Tryon spoke to his Officers. He went down with his ship, dictated by tradition in those days.

Test Dives The wreck of the *Victoria* was discovered in 2004 by Christian Francis and Mark Elyat at a depth of over 150 metres. They were stunned to see it rose vertically from the seabed. The enormous weight of the cannon combined with the turning propellers drilled the ship's bow into the seabed where it remains today.

Our team of eight rebreather divers intended to photograph and film the wreck to a maximum depth of 120 metres. The well-equipped dive centre of Walid Noshie in Beirut provided technical support for the entire expedition. Our first task was to reassemble our rebreathers which had been dismantled for transport. The same day a first test dive was done to check out the working conditions of our equipment. The following day our agenda delivered a wreck dive at a depth of 65 metres. The *Lesbian*, named after the Greek Isle of Lesbos, is a magnificent wreck that was sunk during second World War II and has remained untouched ever since. Bad weather forced us to make a second dive on the wreck the next day. After our first deep dive we agreed to set up a decompression station to heighten

security precautions. During our second dive this station was also tested thoroughly. Everything went well – we decided we were ready for the *Victoria*.

Dives on HMS Victoria Prior to diving the *HMS Victoria*, we had to cross the 80 kilometres from Beirut to Tripoli. We rented a bus which had space for all our gear. Once in Tripoli we were taken to the wreckage by boat, located about 5 kilometres offshore. Very early morning we anchored to the buoy pinpointing the wreck's location. Everything's checked for the last time when I, together with Pim de Roodes & Danny Moens, make our descent to the wreckage as second team. After awaiting dive buddies at the buoy, we finally started our descent.

The wreck loomed at 65 metres; we landed on the stern at 76 metres. The two enormous propellers and rudder caught our attention first. Before descending further I prepared my camera as I wanted pictures of the name plate at the back of the wreckage. After three of four frames we swam deeper, passing the balcony and the entrance of the Admiral's quarters. Positioned on the quarter-deck, was the 9 ton heavy cannon with its barrel pointed to heaven. It was a tremendous sensation and privilege to swim freely right next to this great wreck vertical just like a big apartment block. My dive computer showed a depth of 91 metres. Because my camera housing only allowed a maximum depth of 75 metres. I was not willing to take any further risks. I

limited myself to taking pictures of the big gun while my buddies continued downwards to 110 metres. On the side of the bow I noticed one of the smaller guns protruding from the porthole and gladly snapped a few pictures. Time flew by and after 20 minutes bottom time we had to start our decompression ascent of nearly three hours.

Once back aboard, the crew informed us that a car bomb had exploded 500 metres from where we started off today. Five soldiers were killed and 30 people injured. In the distance we could still see the smoke caused by this outrage. Travel back to Beirut by bus was not reassuring!

Further exploration of the wreckage

The following day was a rest day. And the day after that we were again above the wreck. I had agreed with Pim de Roodes to first take a few pictures at the entrance door of the Admiral's quarters. Meanwhile he would shoot video footage with the minicam mounted on his Kirby Morgan mask. At the top of the wreck the visibility was even better than two days earlier! I immediately started my images after which we swam to the propellers for a few more shots. We then moved back to the bow where, at 85 metres, I left my camera behind on the wreck in order to descend further. At 111 metres we were right underneath the big cannon. The deck's boarded flooring remained in place in some parts, as did the big capstan on the deck. Looking up, it was an incredible, almost hallucinating sight,





Small canon on the side of the wreck



Pim inspecting the inside of the wreck



to see this huge wreckage from this angle. Below the cannon there appeared to be a big hole through which one would be able to swim through. Yet again, time was up and we had to start our ascent and decompression stops. On my way up I didn't forget to pick-up my camera and took a few more pictures of Admiral Tryon's terrace. After more than four hours of diving my head reappeared above the water. This dive left an even bigger impression than the first one.


The Last Incredible Dive This time I decided to leave my camera behind so I could fully enjoy this unique experience. At 120 metres down there were even more holes in the deck. Plates and other tools was what I found looking inside. We left everything untouched as this wreckage is actually a war grave. On the side I discovered a few quick-firing guns still mounted on their original undercarriage. Once back at the big capstan I now

saw the driving gear. Again, the big cannon was above me and I realised that the wreck's bow would one day crush under its enormous weight. I noticed more smaller guns on the side sticking out of the portholes. Following my trail along the bow, the two big propellers reappeared above me. They must each weigh several tons. I arrived back at the rudder and our ascent rope. Behind me was Admiral Tryon's terrace where he once must've stood to get some fresh air. Strange to think he went down with this enormous war-machine and is entombed somewhere inside.

I began my decompression above the most impressive wreck I'd ever seen. No-one knows how much longer HMS *Victoria* will remain in this unique position: vertical on the seabed.

LINK > [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Victoria_\(1887\)](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Victoria_(1887)) ■

Dr. Sawatzky's
Diving Medicine Notes



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