



## A Report from the Field - Muir Creek Mystery Wreck

*By Rob Field*

Reader Warning: The account below is entirely factual, individuals portrayed are real, the verbiage, however, is considerably enhanced to accentuate the drama.

In 2013, while navigating the highway through Sooke to Port Renfrew, Rick Webster saw a strange site, something he might not have noticed had the conditions not been perfect. The normally surf swept beach at the mouth of Muir creek was glassy, the tide was low, the day was calm and the still waters very clear. He peered out and could see a familiar shape, shadows and straight lines beneath the waters; Rick knew this was not normal, this was not NATURAL; this was something that needed further investigation.

Over the following months, Rick proceeded to do some archival research that hinted at the prospect of a 15th century Chinese Exploration Ship. Following his internet, library, and museum research, Rick used a UAV (Unmanned Aerial Drone) to conduct a high tech air-borne reconnaissance survey. The Drone images showed a large shape, long and wide, about the size of a football field, with an enlarged and semi-circular end-zone. The centre of the shape was the flat grey colour



*View of Muir Creek site as seen from the UAV. (Photo: R. Webster)*

of beach sand. By Rick's extrapolation, he saw a shape that perfectly matched the dimensions given for the enormous and fabled treasure ships that left the ports of China to explore and trade in AD 1491. He took his evidence to the universities and the Archaeology Branch who steered him to us, the Underwater Archaeology Society of British Columbia. Rick presented his evidence to Eric Young and Jacques Marc. Subsequently, Tom Beasley met Rick in Vancouver to learn more and the UASBC agreed to investigate the site.

On April 12, 2015 a group of the UASBC's finest went to have a look. The day was not so calm the waters not as placid as the day Rick first noticed the anomaly; Muir creek was not giving up secrets as easily on this day. The group was a well experienced team, led by Explorations Director Jacques Marc, supported by veteran technical diver Jiri Kotler, UVic Archaeology Masters student Aurora Skala, UASBC President Eric Young and Education Director Bronwen Young; lastly, your correspondent Rob Field, also an archaeologist and technical diver rounded out the underwater team. Shore support was Vancouver Island Director John Middleton and veteran diver and long-time UASBC member Paul Spencer accompanied by his loyal canine companion Gracey.

Rick, our guide, stood-by on site eager to meet the team and point the way to where the mystery awaited.

Jacques made introductions and we accessed the location via a torturous winding gravel road. At the terminus we offloaded for the hike down the treacherous cobble/rubble beach. Rick showed members of the team flotsam and industrial wreckage, scattered along

*Continued on page 2*

# President's Message

by: *Eric C. Young*

Everything moves in cycles. I'm not actually certain if things are more positive in the Spring and a bit more sorrowful in the Autumn, or not. In essence it doesn't matter because I sure feel more positive in Spring, and especially this Spring.

You are most likely aware that in the past the provincial government gave us substantial grants. We used to have a half-time Executive Director. Over the past few years we have not received any grants. In March we met with the two Branches that we have dealt with in the past. We told them that we have become capable of self-funding the majority of our operations. What we could use some help with is our major explorations. They were not encouraging about any grants in the near future. This was actually liberating news. We have some savings that we can use to support our search operations. Once we get that major "find" we are free to partner with whomever we wish to help us explore it.

Also in March we took part in the Canadian Underwater Conference in Victoria. It was a trade show for industry types who work underwater. It was very nice to talk with all sorts of people; Whites dry suits, Fleet Diving Unit, RCMP, ROV guys, etc. Lots of them came to our booth because we were the "odd" guys; we weren't selling anything. The liberating moment was listening to the RCMP diving unit trainers. They said that they have a 100% success rate on all their dives! No, that doesn't mean that they always find what they were sent to look for. Plenty of the time they find nothing, but they are then 100% certain that there is nothing there. "He said he threw the gun off the bridge. No, he didn't. There is no gun there." Whole new perspective for when we don't find anything.

That got put to good use in April. A crew of us went searching for any evidence of a wreck off the shore a few kilometres west of Sooke. Lovely flat sandy bottom that stretches out many hundreds of metres from the shore. The sea has been eroding away the glacial till headlands in this area, hence the sand. Right at the base of the cliff the bottom is covered with 50+ cm boulders. About 40 m out there is a line, parallel to shore, of 30-40 cm rocks. Then about 80 m out there is another line of 20 cm rocks. These lines are as long as the beach, over a km. The "evidence" for a wreck is that the kelp wants a firm anchor for its roots. Nature typically dislikes straight lines. The

lines of kelp made us think of human action, but not so, just rocks in a steady state.

In May things got even better. Our Shipwrecks Conference is usually earlier. This year the recent explorations under the Arctic ice meant our best timing was in May. I hope that most of you were able to attend. Every speaker was riveting and they all were zeroed in on the saga of our North. It was heartening to know that our organization is held in such high esteem by the people "in the business".

I feel that the UASBC is blossoming again. I hope that you all find ways to partake in the events that will happen this year. How about the celebration of our 40th year in Vancouver at the September Chapter meeting? "and in Victoria at the October Chapter meeting"

## Muir Creek Mystery Wreck (*cont'd*)

the beach and tangled in the logs and blackberries fringing the high water line. My cursory observation judged the debris to be more modern in age related to logging, booms and docks; no surprise given the proximity to nearby forestry operations. Jacques went straight to work with a clever and simple plan that included gathering spatial data; like waypoints, photos and measurements. He then busied himself assigning compass bearings, delineating survey lanes and pairing buddy teams while we hauled gear, reviewed the plan and got suited up.

The entry was what the brave would call "challenging". The divers clad in their bulky and restrictive drysuits that guarded against the chilling pacific waters, their heavy tanks, and fins carried in their hands were not much help as they waded into the surf that pounded the rocky beach. The inshore water was completely silted in, as a result of the crashing surf, obscuring the subsea floor comprised of wave rounded boulders perfectly positioned to topple (yes, I was humiliatingly upended myself) the top heavy divers splashing and stumbling penguin-like into the crashing waves.

Each diver team carried a float to mark their position, Rick, John, and Paul maintained a track of each team using a combination of binoculars, GPS, and laser

## Muir Creek Mystery Wreck (cont'd)

range-finder. The teams swam out along their assigned track-lines, observing the bottom, and maintaining their bearing perpendicular to the shore, all while monitoring their precious air supply and depth. The surge seemed enormous and swimming was difficult in what we call, "sub-optimal survey conditions". What the divers all observed, once free of the inshore waves, were two widely spaced parallel lines of sea palms and kelp covered rocks lying parallel to the shore with a gap of sand between them. Nothing of obvious cultural origin was observed by any of the six well experienced divers. If we were looking at a wreck of 15th century origin in such an active environment, you would expect to see, at a minimum, some ballast rock and iron concretions as the Chinese vessels (and any large ship) of that era were fastened with iron and equipped with cannon and massive anchors, no hull structure would remain proud of the bottom. Jacques mentioned that he looked at the rocks on shore and off shore and found them to be of similar rounded size and shape suggesting that they are of local origin not ballast. The divers also agreed that



Figure 2: Typical beach gravel and obvious debris of more modern cultural origin. (Photo: R. Webster)

the conditions were challenging with some even succumbing to nausea as a result of the powerful surge and their shaken equilibriums. The depth never exceeded 23 feet/7 meters. In proximity to the feature the depth was only 2-3 m (13 feet).

In examining the results of the data thus far and considering the physical condition of the site and surrounding area, there is nothing that points to a wreck-site. We might have the remains of a rock alignment like a reef-net, fish-trap, or clam garden of First Nations origin, but this speculation is an educated guess at best. The site does not ideally fit the criteria for intertidal features like a clam garden or fish trap, as it is not intertidal. Perhaps the beach has changed geomorphologically, subsided essentially? Further, mobile sediments are not uncommon at this location as Muir Creek is a substantial alluvial fan; one of many that spill into the Juan de Fuca strait. Additional possibilities are that it is simply of natural geological process.

There are more things that could be done to (potentially) solve the riddle at Muir Creek.

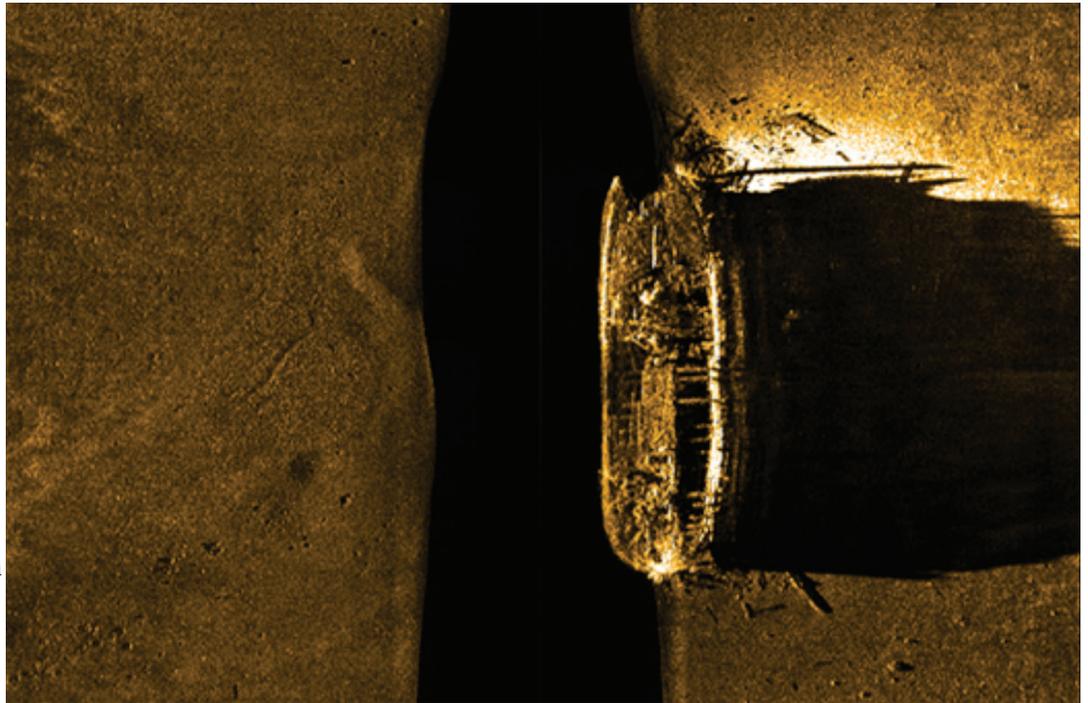
Another would be to walk the beach at low tide with a metal detector to determine if there are any magnetic concretions buried in the beach. Using more readily available tools, divers or even snorkelers, guided by the UAV, or surface support boat, could descend onto any especially curious targets for direct visual analysis.

More expensive approaches would be to run a magnetometer over the area to look for any ferrous materials. Survey the area with multi-beam to produce a nice bathymetric picture. A sub-bottom profiler would reveal any sub-sea floor hull elements buried beneath the sandy sediments.

At the end of our arduous work day we retired to the 17 Mile Pub and hoisted a pint to our success. After all finding nothing is a success in of itself.

Looking back on our efforts and thinking upon survey ideas, I reflect the simplest survey would be on a zero tide with a good pair of binoculars; a repeat of the day when Rick Webster first looked out at the ocean on that calm clear day.

The theme of this year's Shipwrecks conference was Arctic Exploration. The meeting was held on May 9<sup>th</sup> at the Images Theatre located at Simon Fraser University. The theme was chosen to connect with the recent finding of HMS Erebus, one of the Franklin expedition ships. The main conference organizers (Tom Beasley, Keith Bossons and Robyn Woodward) did us a great service in the selection of the theme and to arrange to have such expert speakers available such as Mark-Andre Bernier, Head Parks Canada Underwater Archaeology Service.



*Side scan image of HMS Erebus by Parks Canada*

After the nine excellent presentations during the day session, we had a much better appreciation of what the early arctic explorers endured. Even today with ice breakers and satellite technology, it is a very challenging place to go sailing. Captain Stuart Aldridge of the Canadian Coast icebreaker Sir Wilfred Laurier gave a very informative description of a typical patrol season (July to October) for the Laurier. The vessel services navigational beacons, provides a platform for international research, opens ice filled shipping lanes, charts shipping routes and rescues stranded vessels. Dr. Peter Fox and Mark Atherton gave an informative presentation about underwater imaging technology (e.g. side scan sonar) which is an important search tool for finding shipwrecks.

The search for a north-west passage was the main reason for the early the exploration in Canada's northern archipelago. This route would of course greatly reduce the travel time from Europe to the trade ports in the western Pacific. UBC Professor Hector Williams related the Jens Munk expedition (1619 - 1620) looking for the north-west passage on behalf of the King of Denmark. Munk and two of his crew became the

only survivors. At the order of his King, he attempted to make another trip to the arctic but could not hire enough seamen once they heard about the first trip!

After the loss of the Franklin expedition, it became the primary driving force for arctic exploration. Besides the loss of HMS Erebus and Terror, all 129 ships crew were lost. However while looking for survivors, the searchers continued to fill in the map of northern Canada. James Delgado (Director of Maritime Heritage for NOAA) related the archaeology of the yacht Fox which was part of a rescue effort sponsored by Lady John Franklin. The expedition did not find Franklin but did find the last written report from the expedition dated 1848. David Woodman provided a review of the Inuit observations about what happened to HMS Erebus and HMS Terror. Their observations have been found to be quite accurate and are now given more credence than in the past. They will be used to help locate the still missing HMS Terror. Jacques Marc gave a talk about the

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## SHIPWRECKS CONFERENCE *(cont'd)*

Norwegian vessel Maud. Maud was Amundsen's final ship, purpose built in 1917 to drift over the North Pole. (1918-1925). The ship is currently on the bottom of Cambridge Bay in the arctic. Norway plans to raise her to return her home in 2015.

The Woodward Lecture keynote speaker was Marc-Andre Bernier. He gave the audience the first public presentation of the findings from the April 2015 field work. The finding of HMS Erebus in 2014 is being called the discovery of the century. Marc-Andre described that the combination of a defined plan, hard work and some luck helped find HMS Erebus. The 2015 field work was based on diving thru 2 metre thick ice over the wreck. Much of the kelp growing on the wreck has been removed. This allowed photos of the bow showing the survey marks and the iron plates installed to protect against ice damage. The vessel is still in good shape considering it sank nearly 170 years old. However the stern shows ice damage. The masts have been sheared off by ice but the main deck is in good shape. A camera was inserted inside the wreck and many artifacts have been observed such as the ship's stove. Canada has an agreement with Britain to explore the wreck however HMS Erebus remains the property of Britain. A five year plan is being prepared to study the wreck. Parks Canada will continue their study in August 2015 and the search for the sister ship HMS Terror will also resume.

Thanks again to the organizers and presenters for an excellent, informative and timely conference.

## Search No More

On February 15th the UASBC made one final concerted effort to try finding the rail cars reportedly lost off Sidney Spit. We enlisted the help of the Hydrographic Service, who checked their multi-beam data and provided the location of two potential targets. Upon diving each target we found both to be rock protrusions coming up out of the bottom. Shortly after our dive Jiri Kotler did some research and found a Daily Colonist newspaper article that chronicled the loss of the rail cars. Based on this new information it is clear we were searching the wrong area, as the rail cars were reported to be lost off the southern tip of James Island, not Sidney Spit. However, it is unclear from the article whether the rail cars were recovered or whether they remain to be found?

—*Daily Colonist December 30, 1927*

## Cotton Lies in the Sea

Car barge containing six carloads, Wrecked at South End of James Island at 1 O'clock Yesterday.

In tow of the tug Chieftain, a car barge went ashore on the south end of James Island at 1 o'clock yesterday afternoon according to telephone advices received from the island. The barge was loaded with six cars of cotton, and at present three of the cars lie in the sea with cotton being washed up on the shore by each wave. Half underwater the salvage of the wreck presents a difficult problem and is being undertaken by equipment sent from Vancouver by the Pacific Salvage Company.

Proceeding to the Canadian Explosives Limited's wharf on the east side of the island, the barge and tug may have been swept out of their course by a gale which would render slow navigation difficult in Sidney and Cordova channels. Fishing the heavy railroad cars out of the sea will be made still more difficult should heavy weather arise. The cars are said to belong to the Great Northern Railway.

Mr. Harry Barnett marine surveyor for the San Francisco Board of underwriters, is present at the scene of the mishap and will supervise operations.

# In Memoriam - Michael Pollack

Jan. 8, 1983 – March 23, 2015

It was with great sadness that I learned on March 25th about the passing of Michael Pollack.

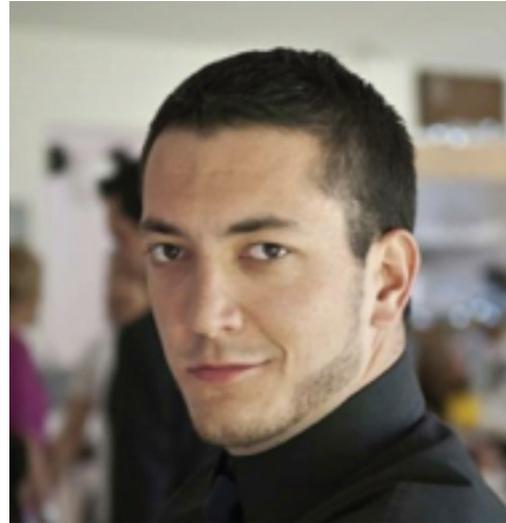
Mike was John Pollack's oldest son. John as many of you will know was instrumental in starting the UASBC Kootenay Chapter in 1990, publishing the West Kootenay's report in 2000 and served as UASBC president from 2000 -2002.

During the 1990s when the UASBC travelled to Nelson to dive with the Kootenay group we would stay at the Pollack Residence. It was during those trips that I came to know the Pollack boys Mike and Ian.

Mike followed in his father's footsteps growing up on the water and in the mountains.

He was a well-spoken and athletic young man, an expert skier and soccer player and loved motorcycles and camping. He also had a special knack of making and keeping friends. Mike attended Selkirk College and Thompson Rivers University graduating with a BSc in Computer Science. After graduating he got a job with the provincial government in the Information Management Branch in Victoria. He loved his work.

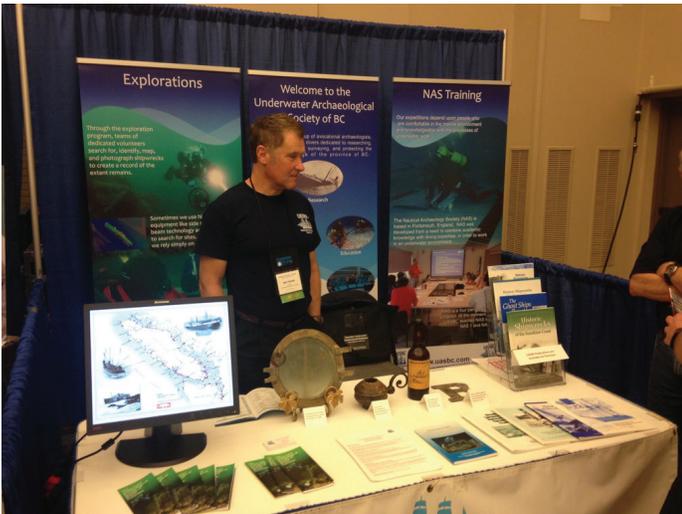
On March 18th Mike was stricken by a massive stroke while at work. Despite the efforts of his co-workers and the surgeons at the Royal Jubilee Hospital, the damage was too great and Mike passed away on March 23rd. A Celebration of Life was held for Mike in Victoria on



April 4th and a number of UASBC members attended. The venue overflowed with people, a testament to the number of people that Mike touched during his short life. All the speakers, family, friends and co-workers all commented on how Mike touched them and how he will be missed.

Prior to the memorial service the UASBC sent bouquet of flowers and a card expressing our deepest sympathies and condolences to John, Kathy and Ian. John expressed his gratitude saying that they were greatly appreciated.

*-Jacques*



Eric Young at the UASBC booth.



L to R: Jacques Marc (facing away) discussing UASBC with a visitor.

Photos by Bronwen Young

Behind table: L: Eric Young R: Jiri Kotler

## Canadian Underwater Conference and Exhibition (CUCE).

UASBC was invited to participate in the Canadian Underwater Conference Exhibition this year. It was held on March 29 - 31 in the Fairmont Empress Hotel and Victoria Conference Centre. The conference featured businesses related to the commercial dive industry and many areas were represented. The Diver Certification Board of Canada, the certifying organization for commercial divers, produced it. The event was attended by delegates and was not open to the general public.

UASBC set up a booth which featured our new 'pop up' display panels. They created a very up to date background with which to attract viewers. Over the course of the three days, we received an increasing number of visitors. Everyone seemed genuinely interested in what we do and many were commercial divers.

Jacques Marc organized the display and attended it. Don Gaynor, George Silvestrini, John Middleton, Jiri Kotler, Bronwen and Eric Young also manned the booth. Many thanks to all these volunteers.

It was nice to see UASBC member Brian Nadwidny there on behalf of his company Air Checklab, which offers many kinds of air analysis. Franks Whites Dive Store, a local business was very active and provided some nice T shirts. Then next to us, the Navy Clearance

Divers from the Esquimalt Fleet Diving Unit displayed an array of underwater gear that they use to do their work. Phil Nuytten of Nuytco Research was down the isle with their amazing subsea technology (Phil will also be a speaker at our Shipwrecks conference in May). There were many many more fascinating displays and seeing them all was really quite an education. Technology is developing by leaps and bounds and it is changing the way we view the ocean as a 'work place'.

There was also a full schedule of presentations, many of them dealing with the technical aspects of commercial diving... various types of training and support systems. We had time to take in one about the RCMP Dive Unit diver training. Others included such topics as ROV simulation training, training the ROV technician, diving in contaminated shipwrecks, repairing underwater cable, to mention just a few!

We didn't really know quite what to expect from the Underwater Conference. We found it to be very professional, well organized and educational. It was definitely worth having a UASBC display. As we were a bit 'different' (ie. not a business), I think we caught the eye of the other delegates.

Hi Folks!

Hope everyone has some great summer holidays planned! What a beautiful spring! I know Anj and I will be staying around Powell River this season as we just opened up a new dive shop; Salish Sea Dive and I suspect we'll be busy. It's a full service shop that has a classroom so we're hoping the fine people at the UASBC will come over and teach a course or two. There's a lot of very interested divers here that would get a lot out of it. We're a 5 minute walk from the Comox ferry

terminal so come on by and say hi! Coffee's on! We've already done some great dives with some very happy people and look forward to many more. There are lot's of excellent wreck dives here with fascinating history so let's get wet!

Gary and Anji

[www.salishseadive.com](http://www.salishseadive.com)

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