

Scrambled History

A Tale of Four
Misidentified Tankers

Text by Michael C. Barnette

IT all started with one simple question based on a single recovered artifact – is the wreck known as the *San Delfino* really the British tanker *San Delfino*? Like pulling on a loose thread of an old sweater, the identities of four tankers sunk in World War II off North Carolina soon unraveled into a tangled mess. However, through the teamwork of several veteran wreck divers, the true stories of these war casualties were eventually revealed. Their startling revelations will ultimately require an extensive revision of North Carolina shipwreck history.

The *San Delfino* was a 463-foot-long tanker built by the Furness Shipbuilding Company in 1938. Heavily armed at the outbreak of World War II, she boasted a four-inch gun and a smaller 12-pound gun mounted on her stern, as well as two twin Marlin machine guns, one Lewis machine gun, and a Savage-Lewis machine gun, which were outfitted around the bridge and stern superstructures. On the evening of April 9, 1942, the *San Delfino* was attacked by the *U-203*. A single torpedo struck the starboard side aft of amidships, igniting the tanker's cargo of 11,000 tons of aviation fuel. Fire spread instantly, as fuel poured out of her aft tanks. The tanker was last seen early on the morning of April 10 burning furiously.

The wreck of the *San Delfino* was tentatively identified on August 7, 1944, by the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Gentian*. The report stated that the *San Delfino* was the only "vessel whose wreck cannot be located with reasonable certainty was sunk near this position." However, the survey did raise some doubt in the ultimate identification due to the wreck possessing a wooden deck. According to the report, "the unburned lines and wooden planking would seem to make it unlikely that this is the wreck of the *San Delfino*." Nonetheless, over the years the wreck resting approximately in 200 feet (61 metres) of water 36 nm (nautical miles) off Oregon Inlet, has been accepted as the *San Delfino*. That was until Dave and Pat Morton recovered a steam pressure gauge off the wreck in 2005.

The recovery of the gauge, which was manufactured by the National Steam Specialty Company of Chicago for the Southwestern Shipbuilding Company of East San Pedro, California, cast doubt onto the identity of the wreck as the *San Delfino*. Furthermore, I learned Greg Masi had recovered a helm in 1993 produced by the Standard Brass and Manufacturing Company of Port Arthur, Texas. While there were explanations as to why American-made equipment could be found on a British tanker in World War II, the lack of any definitive evidence confirming this wreck as the *San Delfino* raised the curiosity of several other wreck divers.

On June 21, 2006, I joined Uwe Lovas and Alan Russell on a dive to the wreck thought to be the *San Delfino*. Using historical images as our guide, we noted the bridge structure was found amidships, in contrast to the forward placement that would be expected on the *San Delfino*. The lack of a stern deck gun and other armament also diverged from what would be found on the wreck of the heavily-armed British tanker. Additionally, we found numerous fire bricks in the stern that apparently originated in St. Louis. However, Uwe made the most important observation when



Photos below: Pressure gauge recovered from the wreck in 200 feet of water off Oregon Inlet by Dave and Pat Morton (Image courtesy of Dave Morton).



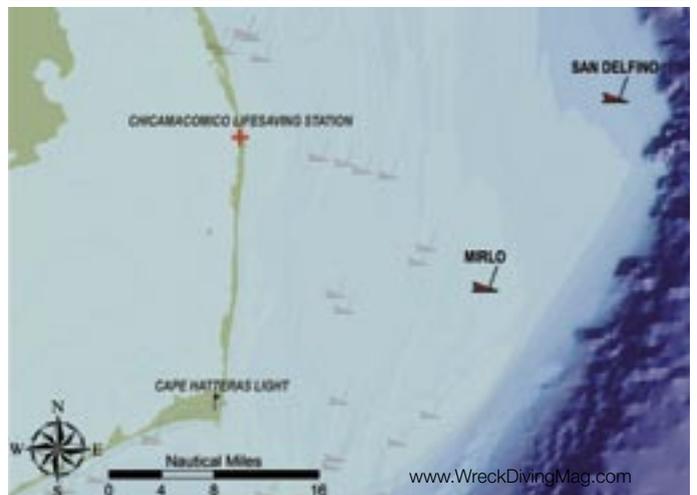
Opposite Page: Underwater image of the rudder from the wreck off Morehead City long believed to be the *Papoose*. However, the *Papoose* (top left) had a *Papoose* rudder, while the *W.E. Hutton* (top right) possessed the exact same rudder as seen on the wreck. (Underwater image courtesy of Brad Sheard; archival images courtesy of National Archives via Brad Sheard).

he noticed the now-exposed powerplant did not consist of twin inline diesels, which powered the *San Delfino*, but instead he found a triple expansion steam engine. This was the one diagnostic feature that definitively betrayed the wreck as being something other than the *San Delfino*. However, if this wreck was not the *San Delfino*, what wreck was it? And where was the wreck of the *San Delfino*?

What we knew was the wreck appeared to be an American tanker powered by a triple expansion engine. It was apparently unarmed, and it was constructed with her bridge superstructure amidships. The damage appeared to be focused on the starboard side immediately forward of the bridge and on the port side adjacent to the engine area. While we initially did not have a definitive answer for our first question, a review of other nearby wreck sites potentially answered the second one.

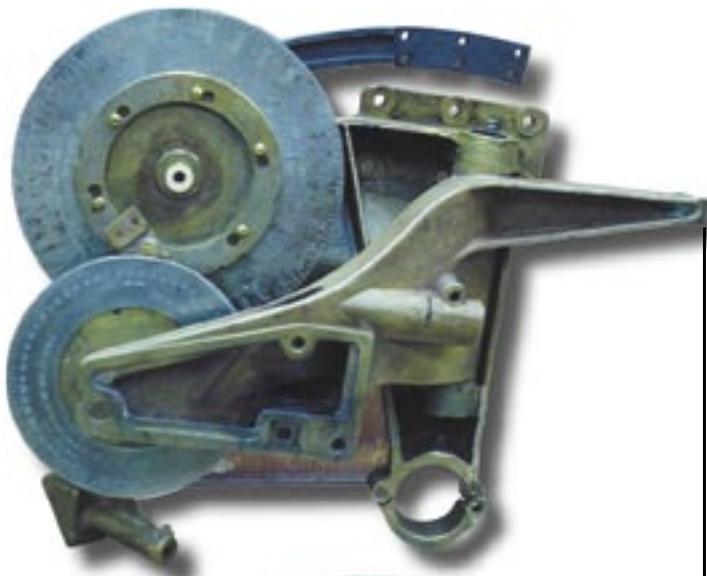
Inshore of the wreck previously thought to be the *San Delfino* rests the remains of another large tanker thought to be the *Mirlo*, a British vessel torpedoed by the *U-117* in August 1918. After an intense fire, the *Mirlo* was rocked by an immense explosion that appeared to break the ship in half, and she sank to the bottom. However, the conclusion that the wreck, known locally as the “Green Buoy Wreck”, was the *Mirlo* was always weak at best. Historical documentation indicates the sinking of the *Mirlo* occurred in shallow water and in fairly close proximity to shore. U.S. Lifesaving Service crew members at the Chicamacomico Station observed the attack from the beach and proceeded to row out to the lifeboats of the *Mirlo*, reaching them in approximately two hours. Subsequent minesweeping surveys of the area indicated the wreck rested in 36 feet (11 metres) of water.

In contrast, the “Green Buoy Wreck” is found approximately 20 nm off the beach in 110 feet (33.5 metres) of water and 17 nm from the reported sinking location of the *Mirlo*. This wreck does possess a four-inch deck gun, which is still mounted on the fantail of the upright stern, yet, both the *San Delfino* and *Mirlo* had four-inch deck guns. What is interesting about this particular gun relates to its aiming mechanism, which was recovered by Roger Hunting in 1993. The artifact has two sighting discs, one for vertical positioning and one for horizontal. The face of the vertical positioning disc was stamped with its manufacturing information, which also included the date 1918 on one side and 1940 stamped on the reverse side. It was common practice to stamp replacement parts with the year of installation when it was added to a new vessel, to facilitate inventory management and parts warranty. This revelation implied the gun sighting mechanism was installed on the vessel in 1940, thus ruling out the “Green Buoy Wreck” being the *Mirlo*, which was lost in 1918. If this wreck was not the *Mirlo*, could it possibly be the *San Delfino*?



Underwater Images: The wreck in 200 feet of water off Oregon Inlet: the bent screw; the stern listing to port; and an exposed boiler (Author).

Right: Map documenting the wrecks long believed to be the *San Delfino* and the *Mirlo* off Oregon Inlet (Author)



Photos on Page: The sighting mechanism from the “Green Buoy Wreck.” Note the 1940 date on the disc at top right. (Images courtesy of Roger Hunting).



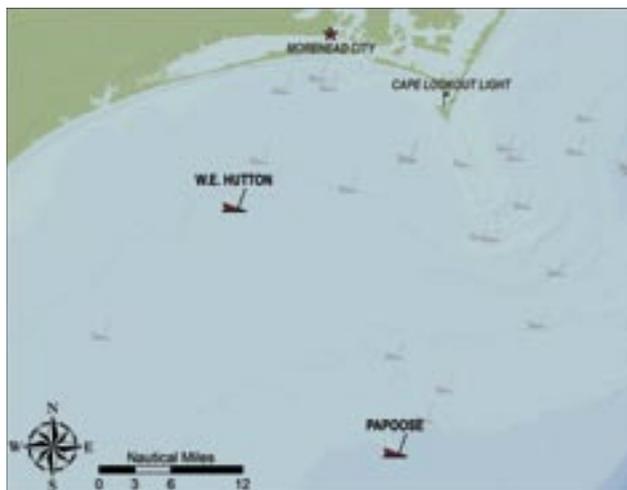
This new theory was supported by an August 11, 1942, Coast Guard report of masts sticking out of the water at the “Green Buoy Wreck” site – two days after the sinking of the *San Delfino*. It is inconceivable that the masts of the *Mirlo* would remain standing out of the water almost 25 years after her sinking, especially in light of her especially violent demise. On July 26, 1944, the *Gentian* surveyed this wreck site. Unfortunately, they were unable to obtain any underwater images of the wreck. Had they been able to lower a camera to the wreck and found its surfaces clean of encrustation, it would have removed all doubt that this wreck was anything but a World War II casualty.

On July 9, 2006, Uwe Lovas inspected the “Green Buoy Wreck” and found significant evidence to conclude the wreck is not the *Mirlo*, but is most likely the *San Delfino*. Within the intact stern section of the wreck, he found the inline diesel engines leaning over to one side, enveloped under thick layers of encrustation. Furthermore, he observed the single auxiliary boiler mounted *aft* of the engines, identical to the layout of the *San Delfino*’s machinery. Unlike the more tapered fantail of the *Mirlo*, the cruiser stern of the “Green Buoy Wreck” is very robust and blunt. According to Uwe, the stern section of the wreck was almost a perfect match when compared to archival images of the *San Delfino*.

With evidence indicating the “Green Buoy Wreck” is actually the *San Delfino* and not the *Mirlo*, we returned to our original question regarding the identity of the now unknown tanker resting in 200 feet (61 metres) of water off Oregon Inlet. The recovery of the steam gauge produced

one potential suspect, but one that seemed highly unlikely at the time. Prior to World War II, Southwestern Shipbuilding Company had only constructed six tankers. Furthermore, only one Southwestern-built tanker was lost in the Atlantic during the war. That vessel was the *SS Papoose*.

The wreck site currently believed to be the *Papoose* is one of the most popular wreck sites off Morehead City. Resting in 120 feet (36.5 metres) of water, the wreck is largely inverted, though in the 1980s the hull used to rest on her port side. The 412-foot long tanker *Papoose* met her fate on March 18, 1942, enroute in ballast from Rhode Island to Texas, when two torpedoes from the *U-124* struck the unarmed vessel. The first hit pierced the port side hull adjacent to the engine, while the second torpedo struck on the starboard side near the amidships superstructure. Fortunately, as she was traveling with empty tanks at the time of the attack, the *Papoose* was spared from an inferno common to tankers brimming with fuel or oil. Regardless, there would seem to be little question in the facts surrounding the *Papoose's* loss. That is unless one digs a little deeper into the archival record and follows the events subsequent to the attack on the *Papoose*.



Above: Map documenting the wrecks long believed to be the *W.E. Hutton* and the *Papoose* off Morehead City (Author).

Top Right: Archival image of the tanker *Papoose* (Image courtesy of National Archives via Brad Sheard).

Bottom Right: Photograph of the *Papoose* taken from the *USS Hamilton* sinking and adrift off Cape Hatteras (Image courtesy of National Archives via Dale Hansen).



(wreck no. 380), near the scene of her abandonment.” It is important to note that the previous statement is hardly definitive, and merely associates the identification of the *Papoose* to a wreck located near the scene of where she was attacked by the *U-124*. The confusion surrounding the identification of these various war casualties is further evident in the *Gentian's* entry of the aforementioned “wreck no. 380,” which states this wreck was previously reported as the tanker *Ario*. These contradictory statements hardly offered a convincing conclusion as to where the wreck of the *Papoose* was actually located.

While many books document the sinking of the *Papoose* on March 18, the Eastern Sea Frontier (ESF) War Diary records quickly revealed that the *Papoose* stayed afloat for at least two days following the *U-124* attack. The ESF records the sinking of the *Papoose* on March 20, 1942, though the basis of this conclusion is unclear, and the exact time of her sinking is still unknown. With this information in hand, we wondered if the *Papoose* was actually adrift and moving northward over the two days following the attack off Morehead City. Perhaps there was some reason overlooked



An initial review of the archival record revealed there was some confusion as to where the *Papoose* actually sank. During the *Gentian's* survey of North Carolina war casualties in 1944, the wreck of the *Papoose* was initially identified off Oregon Inlet at the “Green Buoy Wreck” site. According to the *Gentian* entry, this “wreck had for some inexplicable reason been originally identified as the *Papoose*.” Why would the *Papoose* be considered a potential suspect for a wreck that was over 100 nm from its supposed sinking site? However, the narrative continued, stating the *Papoose* “is believed to have been located in 34 09.1N, 76 40.5W

by the *Gentian* for why the *Papoose* was initially thought to have sunk north of Diamond Shoals at the “Green Buoy Wreck” site. Since we now believe that wreck to be the *San Delfino*, could the wreck in 200 feet (61 metres) of water offshore Oregon Inlet possibly be the *Papoose*?

A thorough review of the archival record by Dale Hansen clearly indicated the tanker *Papoose* did not sink off Morehead City, was adrift for several days, and likely sank somewhere north of Diamond Shoals. At 4:45 pm on March 20, the minesweeper *USS Hamilton* received a report of a disabled tanker at 34° 59'N latitude and 75° 04'W

longitude. The *USS Hamilton* proceeded to the area and reported finding the “American tanker *Papoose* a derelict with evidence of torpedo hit aft, shell hit on bridge. No sign of life and (sic) but one life boat apparently missing. Down by stern to deck awash but on even keel.” Furthermore, a March 21 report filed by the US Coast Guard Air Station in Elizabeth City indicated an aircraft observed the *Papoose* drifting at roughly 35° 23’N latitude and 75° 07’W longitude, or roughly 30 nm southeast of Oregon Inlet. An aerial search covering a large area the following day was unable to locate the *Papoose*. The failure to find the drifting tanker was possibly due to the vessel’s sinking some time late on March 21. With this information, we had positive proof from multiple sources indicating the tanker *Papoose* did not sink off Morehead City. The chain reaction of questions continued – if the *Papoose* did not sink off Cape Lookout, then what was the identity of the wreck at that site? Furthermore, did the *Papoose* ultimately come to rest in 200 feet (61 metres) of water off Oregon Inlet at the site previously thought to be the British tanker *San Delfino*?

There has long been a controversy over the true identity of the wreck off Morehead City currently believed to be the *Papoose*. One theory simply maintains that the wrecks of the *Papoose* and *W.E. Hutton* are transposed. The tanker *W.E. Hutton* does possess similar dimensions and configuration to that of the *Papoose*, and was torpedoed by the *U-124* just after the *Papoose*. However, unlike the *Papoose*, the *Hutton*’s tanks were fully loaded with bunker fuel. Two torpedoes struck the bow and port side amidships, igniting the *Hutton*’s flammable cargo. Approximately 45 minutes after the attack, survivors noted that the flaming ship suddenly disappeared, most likely when the tanker plunged to the bottom.

The historical record makes it clear that the *Papoose* did not sink off Morehead City, but drifted north. However, an inspection of the inverted wreck off Cape Lookout reveals that part of the *Papoose/Hutton* reversal theory is correct. During the 1980s, photographer and author Brad Sheard captured an image of the wreck’s rudder that would be the key diagnostic feature in the wreck’s true identification. He noted a distinct triangular support gusset at the top of the rudder. A review of archival images of the tankers *Papoose* and *W.E. Hutton* while in ballast allowed an inspection of each rudder as they appeared on the respective vessels. It was obvious that the *Papoose* had a rounded rudder, while the *Hutton* clearly had a rudder possessing the same triangular gusset as captured in Brad Sheard’s underwater image. This evidence led us to believe that the offshore wreck currently off Morehead City is, in fact, the *W.E. Hutton*. While we answered one question, again we were faced with the introduction of yet another question – what is the true identity of the wreck known as the *W.E. Hutton*?

The answer to that question could be explained by reviewing the course of events involving yet another tanker during March 1942. Prior to the attack of the *Papoose* and *Hutton*, the tanker *Ario* ran afoul of the *U-158* in the early hours of March 15, while traveling in ballast from New York to Texas. Steaming south off Cape Lookout, a single torpedo crippled the 435-foot long tanker. The *U-158* then



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proceeded to pelt the stricken vessel with shells from its deck gun. For approximately ten minutes, artillery rounds tore into the *Ario*, ripping holes throughout her hull and superstructure. Just as with the *Papoose*, however, the empty tanker refused to sink directly after the attack.

The *Ario* was last seen on the afternoon of March 15 drifting far over on her side. A couple of days later, a patrol aircraft observed a sunken vessel on its side west of Cape Lookout. Apparently, this wreck was not well documented, as another aircraft observed the submerged hull on March 23 and proceeded to attack it, believing it was an enemy submarine. Later that afternoon, a dispatch from yet another aircraft stated: “Wreck on bottom apparently sunken vessel on its side and menace to navigation. Position 34-30N 76-50W.” Unfortunately, this report was not received by the tanker *Olean*, which was damaged in an attack by the *U-158* just prior to the attack on the *Ario*. Trying to make her way to safety, the crippled *Olean* reported striking a submerged object on March 24, at position 34° 31’N latitude and 76° 50’W longitude. On March 25, divers were placed on the wreck and confirmed it was a “sunken merchant vessel,” but unfortunately, the vessel’s identity was never confirmed.

The position of the *Ario* was never accurately reported, which is not totally surprising given the wartime activities transpiring off Cape Lookout during the period. Numerous U-boat attacks occurred just days after the *Ario*’s loss, most notably the attack on the *Papoose* and *Hutton*, which kept the Coast Guard and Navy busy off Cape Lookout. Furthermore, the ongoing salvage of the *Olean* also demanded significant Coast Guard and Navy resources. In that interim, the drifting wreck of the *Ario* simply slipped through the cracks. Most accounts still list the *Ario* as missing. This conclusion is almost inconceivable given the historical record clearly stated that she sank in shallow



Above: Map documenting the sequence of events in the *Ario*'s sinking. (Author)

Top Right: Wreck of the *Ario* resting on her side off Morehead City. (Image courtesy of National Archives via Dale Hansen)

Following Three Photos: Images of the inshore wreck off Morehead City: anchor; scattered hull wreckage; and one of the three masts found on the site. (Underwater images courtesy of Paul Hudy)



water. With the technology and resources available to divers and fishermen today, she undoubtedly would have been found by now. Ironically, the wreck of the *Ario* has likely been dived for decades.

As we now know the *Papoose* sank north of Diamond Shoals, and the *W.E. Hutton* actually rests at the offshore site formerly believed to be the *Papoose*. Deductive reasoning would therefore conclude that the *Ario* is the true wreck found at the inshore site formerly thought to be the *Hutton*. Unfortunately, due to the wreck's current disposition, it is unlikely any conclusive evidence can be gained from the site. This is largely due to the extensive demolition work conducted on the wreck to remove it as a hazard to navigation following the sinking of the freighter *Suloide*; the *Suloide* grounded on the submerged hull of the *Ario* in March 1943, and eventually sank in close proximity to the tanker. However, it is interesting to note that there are apparently the remains of *three* masts at the site currently known as the *Hutton*. Both the *Hutton* and the *Papoose* only possessed two masts, while the *Ario* was constructed with three masts. Further, no other tankers are known to have been lost in the vicinity of this inshore wreck site. Therefore, it is a reasonable conclusion that the wreck thought to be the *W.E. Hutton* is actually the tanker *Ario*.

With all this new information in hand, we returned to one of our original questions – what is the identity of the wreck previously thought to be the *San Delfino*? The wreck resting in 200 feet (61 metres) of water off Oregon Inlet possesses several features that could lead one to believe she is indeed the tanker *Papoose*. Damage to the portside hull adjacent to the engine, as well as damage on the starboard side amidships (immediately forward of the superstructure),

matches the historical account of the *U-124*'s attack on the *Papoose*. Additionally, the large single screw on the wreck has two blades bent forward, which was likely a result of the vessel hitting bottom stern first. This is consistent with the reports and archival images documenting that the *Papoose* had settled by the stern, and most likely sunk stern first. The recovered gauge manufactured for the Southwestern Shipbuilding is one of the strongest pieces of evidence supporting our theory that the *Papoose* sunk off Oregon Inlet. Further, the helm recovered by Greg Masi manufactured in Port Arthur, Texas, also gives credence to this theory. In April 1926, the *Silvanus* – the former name of the *Papoose* – collided with the tanker *Thomas M. Wheeler* on the Mississippi River, resulting in a horrendous explosion and fire. The *Silvanus* was gutted by flames, and was eventually put up for auction in October 1926. Bought by the Petroleum Navigation Company, she was towed to Beaumont, Texas, for reconstruction. It is interesting to note that Port Arthur, where the helm was manufactured, is less than 20 miles away from Beaumont.

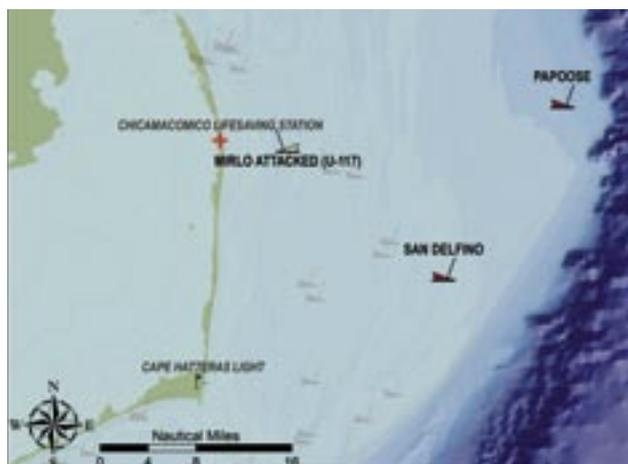
While everything recovered off the wreck thought to be the *San Delfino* has proven to be of domestic origin, a helm stand recovered off the stern of the wreck by Gene Peterson in 1997 did give slight pause when considering the *Papoose* theory. Gene found the helm was manufactured by MacTaggart Scott and Company of Edinburgh, Scotland, and patented in 1917. This was thought to support the original theory that the wreck was the British tanker *San Delfino*. However, that is easily disproved by the absence of several critical features the *San Delfino* was known to possess, such as armament and diesel engines. Further, the dimensions and layout of the vessel are also inaccurate. During World War I, MacTaggart Scott and Company built their reputation on the production of hydraulic steering telemotors (i.e., helms), so it is possible that the Dutch owners opted for this machinery when the vessel was originally built, or possibly during the tanker's refit as the *Papoose* in 1927. I decided to test this theory and contacted MacTaggart Scott and Company, asking if they could track down the history of Gene's helm, which was embossed with the serial number ST2098. On July 11, I received an e-mail

from the company, stating the steering telemotor, "serial no. ST2098, left our works on 14 February 1927, name of ship, *Sillanus* (sic) *Papoose*." With this information, we had conclusive evidence that the wreck of the tanker *Papoose* rests in 200 feet (61 metres) of water off Oregon Inlet.

In the past, it would appear that some of these wrecks were identified by deductive reasoning using limited data, while still others were contrived matches to fulfill a bureaucratic exercise. Over the years, assumptions were accepted as irrefutable fact. However, based on our analysis of archival information, diagnostic shipwreck features, and recovered artifacts, we feel confident that several North Carolina shipwrecks have been misidentified. Aside from the definitive identification of the *Papoose* at the site previously believed to be the *San Delfino*, based on the compelling evidence offered in this article we also believe the following: the wreck previously thought to be the *Mirlo* is actually the *San Delfino*; the wreck previously thought to be the *Papoose* is actually the *W.E. Hutton*; and the wreck previously thought to be the *W.E. Hutton* is actually the *Ario*. Hopefully, further examination by divers and historians will reveal yet more information to further clarify the historical record.



The true locations of the *Ario* and *W.E. Hutton* off Morehead City. (Author)



Above: The true locations of the *Papoose* and *San Delfino*, and the reported sinking position of the *Mirlo* off Oregon Inlet. (Author)

This story could not have been told without the critical assistance of several other wreck divers—their contributions, observations, and insight helped to ultimately reveal the true fates of these four shipwrecks: Dale Hansen, Roger Hunting, Uwe Lovas, Greg Masi, Dave Morton, Pat Morton, Gene Peterson, and Brad Sheard.

Michael is the Founder and Director of the Association of Underwater Explorers (<http://www.mikey.net/ae>), a coalition of divers dedicated to the research, exploration, documentation, and preservation of submerged cultural resources. Employed as a marine ecologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).