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I Was the 8th Man Down!

Beneath the sea was a storied lost treasure; but something claimed seven divers and was awaiting the next!



DURING A terrific storm some years ago, an unidentified sailing schooner carrying treasure struck the rocks on the southeastern tip of Malpelo Island, north of Colombia, and had her bottom torn away. Seven attempts by salvage organizations were made to retrieve the mysterious treasure hoard, supposedly resting in the shattered hulk.

In each attempt, the diver had failed to return to the surface. His air line had snapped; there was no sign of what might have caused the tragedy.

When I heard the story, it sounded like a challenge. The reason for the numerous failures, I thought, was that the divers had met with some unusual condition for which they were unprepared, or that they had drowned when attacked by large tiger sharks which abound in these South American waters. Having fought tiger sharks and huge octopi, and on one occasion a giant squid, I decided to be the eighth man down.

We chartered an auxiliary sloop and sailed from the little seaport town of Buenaventura, Colombia, to the tip of the island where the ill-fated schooner had reportedly gone down. We dropped anchor about 200 yards offshore over a spot where the wreck allegedly rested. In a short time, we were ready for actual diving operations.

As I stood on the short ladder waiting for my helmet to be screwed to my shoulder plate, I thought of those seven divers who had never returned. But it was no time to dwell on their undiscovered fates. Making sure my long, double-edged shark knife was securely attached to me, I stepped from the ladder into the water.

A short distance down, I signaled to stop lowering, as the air pressure needed adjusting; I also wanted to know if the responses of the crew above were correct and rapid.

Then I continued my descent until the hulk of a vessel appeared directly beneath me. I knew this was the ship I was seeking, for it had very little encrustation on it.

I manipulated my lines carefully among the sharp rock outcrops, as a hard rub on one of the jagged edges might have torn my

air hose. The black hole beneath me was not inviting, but there were no signs of sharks or any large fish among the strings of underwater plants that hung, like leafy pendulums, about the wreck. A few moments and I had landed on the slimy deck of the shattered schooner-wreck. A large craft, it rested on an almost even keel in a rocky ravine, her bottom buried deep in the sand.

In the pale light that penetrated from the surface, the hulk looked sinister. It lay there, white and ghostly, with a high black wall of rock around it like a gigantic coffin.

THE AFTERHATCH was open, its cover partly off. Just forward appeared the companionway. Making certain that neither of my lines was fouled, I loosened my shark knife and climbed cautiously down the sand-covered steps to the heavy door of the chamber below. There I received the jolt of my life!

Beside the half-opened door of the cabin and immersed in several inches of sand, lay a copper diving helmet. I dug it out of the sand and debris and, in the light of my torch, looked inside. It was gazing down upon a skull—the white jaws wide apart in a set and uncanny grin!

I began to dig in the sand about the diving dress, and finally unearthed the remains of the suit. A skeleton was encased in the shredded remnants. Here was one of the seven divers who had not returned!

I cleared the sand away from the door of the cabin and entered. It was approximately 15 feet wide and partly filled with crates of various sizes and shapes. One had the top pried off. I flashed my torch into the opening. Silver bars! They were darkened by the salt water, but after I rubbed the butt of my torch against them, the white metal shone through.

Yes, treasure was here all right! How

Its tentacles came closer. I drew my knife. I would give the giant creature a fight!

else, too—some mysterious killer who had already

By LT. HARRY E. RIESEBERG

much could not be computed then, nor whether all the boxes held treasure; but I felt certain it was a tremendous hoard.

I signaled for those above to send down a steel sling for hauling my find to the surface. After stowing six of the boxes in the sling, I gave the signal to haul them up.

Spying a length of tarpaulin covering something large alongside the remaining boxes, I saw a golden gleam reflected in the water. I gave the tarpaulin another jerk, and the water-rotted substance dropped away, revealing a beautiful statue.

It was bronze and had large eyes which seemed to be made of multicolored precious stones. At the base of the statue were a number of small bones, whitened and half buried. Among them, two human skulls grinned up at me. Close by lay a lead-sheathed boot, with remnants of a diver's dress still clinging to it. I stood there trembling. I could not shake the uncanny feeling that somebody or something was watching me.

SO STRONG was this sense of a presence in this lonely, silent tomb that I turned my flashlight about the cabin. It moved over the boxes and crates and returned finally to the statue. As it shone past the bronze figure, I saw a huge shape rising behind the dim outlines of the crates.

My heart pounded wildly, and I became faint with terror. It was moving across the cabin doorway, and I saw that the shape was a massive octopus! The huge monster was fully 20 feet across with a ball of a body at least four to five feet in width. Its long, slimy tentacles were lined with great saucerlike cups.

Now I knew the fate of the seven lost divers, and I realized that I, too, was trapped in this watery grave. There was only one way out, and that was blocked by this giant creature! Its tentacles swerved and quivered continuously, as if waiting for an opportune moment to crush me. Then it began to crawl slowly along the sandy floor toward me. In spite of its great bulk and spreading arms, it moved quickly. And all the while, its terrible eyes watched me.

As I backed away, the creature lunged at me. One of its powerful arms stirred the sand into a great cloud. Backing as far as I could into the corner of the cabin, I drew my shark knife from its sheath and waited. The 14-inch blade didn't seem much good against a powerful octopus, but with half a chance I could give the creature a fight. It was a desperate measure.

Now, the octopus was enraged, changing

from one color to another, its tentacles reaching closer and closer. I stood waiting. Suddenly, an arm shot directly at me. With a sideswipe, I sliced through it, almost without knowing that my knife had made contact. Each time another tentacle came forward, I severed it from the sickening wart-covered body. I was so close to the creature, I could see directly into the eyes, watching me fixedly with a blank stare.

A stream of dark matter shot forth from the octopus' ink sac, spreading slowly upward in the water. But its strength was unconquerable. Despite the wounds, one arm had twisted itself around my helmet.

With a scream that sounded hideous in my own ears, I drove my knife upward at the quivering arm wrapped around my helmet. The blade sliced through the boneless flesh, and its grip relaxed as the sinuous tentacle parted in two.

Suddenly, amid this slashing, something seemed to tear at my belt. I felt a savage jerk as a stream of air bubbles shot out of the front of my diving dress. It was punctured. A small rivulet of blood discolored the water close to me! I was bleeding, and the smell of blood in the sea would attract sharks by the dozen!

I could visualize their dark fins cutting the surface above as I was being pulled to the salvage ship—if I were fortunate enough to get that far. That was the last thing I remember before I blacked out.

WHEN I OPENED my eyes with a start, I saw my partner, who had remained on deck and supervised the handling of my lines and crew.

"Well, Lieutenant," he said quietly, "you did come back."

"How—how did you get me up?" I stammered, unbelievably.

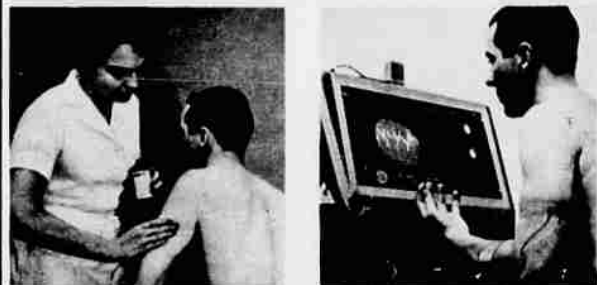
"When we didn't hear from you for so long, I ordered two of the native divers to go down and see what was the matter. They found you with your lines fouled and three tentacles of an octopus clinging to you. The octopus was dead. They closed the air-pressure valves in your torn suit, cut away the lines and tentacles, and got you clear just in time. The dress was leaking fast, but they were able to get you on board before all the air was gone."

"Thank God!" was all I could say.

I was the eighth diver who had gone down to that wreck and the only one who had escaped a terrible death—and got the treasure, too!

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