



The History Channel Comes to

Long Island



by Bill Bleyer

When John Gorman's *Lock Ness* pulled out of its Freeport slip early on the last day of June, it wasn't carrying its usual load of local scuba divers. It was carrying the co-hosts and six producers, cameramen and technicians for The History Channel series "Deep Sea Detectives." The mystery they had come to Long Island to solve is what sank the *U.S.S. San Diego* in 1918. The consensus of most historians is that the armored cruiser was sent to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean off Fire Island by a mine laid by a German U-boat. But the Deep Sea Detectives had their doubts.

After the two-hour ride out to the 504-foot-long wreck, 11 miles offshore, hosts Jon Chatterton and Melanie Paul with guest talking head John Hulburt dove to the disintegrating hulk sitting in 110 feet of water to look for clues. After the ship -- the only major Navy ship lost in World War I -- went to the bottom with the loss of six of its 1,114 crewman, the Navy initially decided the cause was a torpedo fired by a German U-boat. Later, Chatterton said, "It was kind of a for-gone conclusion that it was sunk by a mine" laid by a U-boat.

But Jed Rauscher of the Maine-based Lone Wolf Documentary Group, the co-producer of the episode that will air on November 8 said that many reputable submarine Web sites concluded that the U-156 carried no mines. He said that as the show's writers researched the ship, other possibilities emerged: a fire caused by spontaneous combustion in the coal bunkers could have ignited ammunition stored nearby; or perhaps sabotage by a German agent, a theory raised five years ago by a University of North Carolina historian who examined previously-secret Russian documents



Jon Hulbert looks for blast damage inside the *San Diego*

that asserted that a spy planted a bomb on the ship. In steamships of the time, "coal fires happened all the time," Chatterton said. "The location of the blast hole doesn't make sense if it was a mine," he added, "because the hole is so far aft on the hull." On the ride offshore, the cameramen tested their underwater cameras and communication equipment that would allow the divers to talk to each other and be recorded on the surface. Over breakfast, Rauscher went over the script with the



Jon Hulbert (l) and John Chatterton (r) examine a drawing of the wreck before their first dive.

hosts. "In the summer of 1914, the world changed forever," intoned Chatterton, a 52-year professional diver renowned in dive circles for discovering the identify of a U-boat off New Jersey, a six-year effort chronicled in a new book, *Shadow Divers*, that Fox plans to turn into a movie. "A conflict between Austria and Serbia would spread like wildfire throughout Europe and eventually to North America. "Before it was over, World War I, the Great War, would cost millions of lives and sink one U.S. capital warship, the *U.S.S. San Diego*," added Paul, 30, who recently joined the show and was filming her third episode. "She went to the bottom right over there."

Paul lives in Fort Lauderdale, where her regular job is director of marketing for the International Association of Nitrox and Technical Divers. But she's originally from Michigan, where she began to dive at 15, wearing a wetsuit, rather than a warmer drysuit, despite the frigid waters of the Great Lakes. "I'm a very experienced diver," she said. But in recent years, she's been doing warm water diving, so her Long Island visit would mark her first cold water Atlantic dive. She got the History Channel gig as Chatterton's third co-host by replying to a blind e-mail seeking someone with diving and acting experience. "I used to model professionally in New York City and my degree is an advertising, so I've worked on radio and television projects," she said. "And I can dive." The show went on the air about a year ago; 22 episodes have aired and another 10 are in the can. The idea for the series came from The History Channel, which approached Lone Wolf to produce the series. The company contacted Chatterton and his longtime dive buddy, Richie Kohler, to serve as the original hosts. Lone Wolf and Atlanta-based Liquid Pictures, which actually handles the filming, are production partners in the show. "The format is

you start out with a good story with some kind of mystery to it," Chatterton said. It's fleshed out with underwater and archival footage and knowledgeable talking heads.

On this trip, Chatterton brought along longtime friend Jon Hulburt of Delaware, who has made 160 dives on the wreck. "He's the only guy I've ever known who was able to go from one end of the wreck to the other -- inside," Chatterton told the camera before the first dive. Neither of them had visited the *San Diego* in 15 years and when they dropped down through the murky 52-degree water, they were surprised at how it had deteriorated. After the first exploratory dive that included a quick penetration through one hole, Hulburt said "inside the decks have fallen away, but she still looks like the old lady." The crow's nest is still recognizable lying on the sand and the guns still stick out from the side



John Chatterton makes final adjustments to his gear.

of the hull, they noted. But in some areas, Chatterton added, "beams are just collapsing." And said Hulburt: "the stern is just gone."

The divers pointed out that there are many more ways to penetrate the wreck now and that makes it more dangerous because it will encourage divers to go inside the hull where the structure is so weak that it could collapse. After the second dive, during which Chatterton and Hulbert penetrated deep inside, the host said "in the areas where the coal bunkers are, there's also some munitions. But what we have to do is really study the [design] drawings to see how feasible it is for a coal fire to have triggered an explosion in one of the munitions rooms." Chatterton said no conclusions about the destruction of the *San Diego* could be made until the research is completed in a few months. But Paul, after emerging from her first Northeast ocean dive, was unequivocal despite the cold water and limited visibility. "I loved it," she said into the camera. "It was an awesome dive."

While the *San Diego* is the show's first Long Island wreck, "we're looking at a couple in Long Island Sound for future shows," Chatterton said.

