



Photos: Odyssey Marine Exploration

Searching for 'Little *Titanic*'

A *Time* magazine article in 1959 called it 'Little *Titanic*' – an 'unsinkable' liner that hit an iceberg on its maiden voyage and went down with tragic loss of life. However, where the legacy of *Titanic* is SOLAS and countless box office receipts, Danish vessel *Hans Hedtoft* left behind only mystery and controversy. Half a century after the ship disappeared without a trace off the coast of Greenland, a diving company is aiming to locate the wreck and come back with some answers for relatives of the victims.

Named after a former prime minister of Denmark, *Hans Hedtoft* was meant to be a vessel that, in the words of Captain Poul Rasmussen, represented "a revolution in Arctic navigation". The specially designed ship was advanced for its time, with a riveted hull, seven watertight compartments and top-of-the-range

instrumentation. "*Hans Hedtoft* was indeed a state-of-the-art ship," says Tom De Richelieu, managing director of No Limits Diving, which is launching the search for the wreck. "It had the best crew possible, excellent machinery, and a very ambitious captain who was eager to break records."

The vessel left Copenhagen on 7 January 1959 for Godthaab, the capital of Greenland, and made the journey in record time. Yet the return journey from the region on 29 January saw it encounter treacherous force 12 gales off the southernmost tip of the island and on the following morning she broadcast a familiar SOS: "collision with iceberg". Hours later the vessel reported that it was slowly sinking; evacuation would have been near impossible. Attempts by merchant vessels and aircraft to reach *Hans Hedtoft* in time were sty-

The ROV above is similar to the one that will be used to find the *Hans Hedtoft*

mied by appalling conditions, and no trace of the vessel or the 95 souls on board was ever seen again, except for a single lifebelt that washed up months later on the coast of Greenland.

Initially, No Limits Diving will use a combination of sonar and magnetometer to accurately locate the wreck. It will subsequently investigate the hull externally with a remotely operated vehicle, though De Richelieu for one does not expect to discover any evidence of an impact with the hull. He contends that *Hans Hedtoft* was sunk not by an iceberg, but by construction flaws that resulted from welding ice-enforced 32mm sections of the hull to 16mm sections at the vessel's machine room bulkhead. De Richelieu believes the bad weather took the hull beyond its stress limits and that it cracked at this weak spot. Warnings about the vessel's rigid frame were voiced before its maiden voyage by at least one prominent shipbroker.

The controversy over the construction of *Hans Hedtoft* is not limited to its readiness for the icy waters of Greenland. It seems during construction the vessel was fitted out with removable armaments, (including anti-aircraft guns) and an ammunition room. The Danish Ministry of Defence claimed that this was in case the vessel needed to be repurposed as a military supply vessel, but others claim the liner could have had a more aggressive role. Either way, the more bellicose aspects of *Hans Hedtoft's* design were removed and stowed before its maiden voyage. Fate had decided its appointment with danger and death would come in a different form – and a good deal more swiftly than expected. **E**

Nick Blackmore, editor, Safety at Sea International

50 years ago in *Fairplay*

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STATISTICS of shipbuilding in the principal countries (new construction in hand or on order on 1 January 1959) prepared by the Shipbuilders' Council of America from the records of that association and from other sources, show that the decline in work has accelerated in the last six months, and that the world orderbooks are now below the level of January 1957. Nevertheless, the amount still on hand is substantial and is equivalent to about three years' work at the present rate of output. In round figures, the decline since the beginning of 1958 is about 7M gt, and, as the output for the year

was about 9M gt, orders have exceeded cancellations by about 2M gt over that period. This shows an undercurrent of confidence which is difficult to reconcile with present trade conditions; but it is probably explained by the orders placed by the large oil companies and by those established owners who must continue to build if they are to continue in business. It is probable, of course, that the figures rather overestimate the position, for there are undoubtedly cancellations which have not been made public and orders which are very delicately 'balanced'. **E**