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An underwater photograph of a shipwreck, showing the rusted metal hull and various mechanical parts like a steering wheel and pipes. The scene is dimly lit, with a blueish tint, and the seabed is visible in the background.

Secrets from the Sea

Meet Shipwreck Hunter David Mearns, M.S. '86

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An underwater photograph showing the wreckage of a ship, likely a shipwreck, lying on the ocean floor. The scene is dimly lit with a blue-green hue, and various pieces of metal and debris are visible. The ship's structure is partially submerged and appears to be in a state of decay.

Seeking the Secrets

David Mearns has traveled the world, becoming an authority on the location and salvaging of shipwrecks, many of which were thought lost forever. But two of his most significant moments happened at the University of South Florida.

By Mary Patrick Walker

The first occurred in the mid-1980s when Mearns, then a student in the College of Marine Science, used an old, abandoned piece of equipment for a study of the ocean floor, a decision that later led to breakthroughs in finding shipwrecks.

The second happened in 1994, when Mearns returned for the opening of USF Tampa's Knight Oceanographic Research Center, located adjacent to the USF St. Petersburg campus. While there, he met with Werner Von Rosenstiel, a USF benefactor who encouraged him to abandon conventional thinking and strike out on his own, developing the oceanographic research wing of the British company he now owns.

"The cliché would be 'seize the day,'" said the 52-year-old Mearns about Von Rosenstiel's advice. "But it was much deeper than that. I'll never forget that conversation."

Mearns certainly has made the most of his opportunities, finding more than 20 sunken vessels over the years. He achieved the deepest shipwreck find ever – of the German World War II blockade runner *Rio Grande* – at 5,762 meters (almost 19,000 feet); and the oldest colonial wreck ever found – the *Esmeralda*, a 16th Century Portuguese Nau in the fleet of Vasco da Gama.

He also made the 2001 discovery of the British ship *HMS Hood* (sunk by the Nazi ship *Bismarck*). In 2009, Mearns led a team that found the *AHS Centaur*, an Australian hospital ship sunk by a Japanese submarine in May of 1943 off Queensland, Australia.

He also found the *HMAS Sydney II*, an Australian warship sunk in 1941 by a German warship disguised as a merchant vessel. He's written a book about that discovery, "The Search for the Sydney," as well as one about finding the Hood, "Hood and Bismarck."

His success in his chosen profession started at USF St. Petersburg and



of the Seas

involved, humbly enough, a study of carbonate hard bottoms off the coast of North Carolina.

Mearns, a native of Jersey City, N.J., had come to USF after getting a bachelor's degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University. He started in the marine biology program but soon switched to marine geology.

Dr. Albert Hine, Associate Dean of the USF College of Marine Science, served as Mearns' advisor and got him involved in the research of the limestone promontories off the North Carolina coast. Mearns' graduate thesis focused on biological erosion and the ocean bottom's →

Above: A lifeboat from the Royal Australian Navy light cruiser, *HMAS Sydney*, which was destroyed in a battle with the German auxiliary cruiser *Kormoran* in November of 1941. All 645 aboard were lost.
Right: David Mearns at the USF College of Marine Science.





Above: A memorial plaque was laid on the foredeck of *Centaur* on Jan. 12, 2010. The *Centaur* wreck site has been marked as a war grave and is protected with a navigational exclusion zone under the Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976. Right: A sailor's boot found amid the wreckage of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*. The ship was sunk by a Japanese submarine off the coast of Queensland, Australia, in May of 1943. Of the 332 persons on board, only 64 survivors were rescued, some 36 hours after the attack.

response to the 1984 Hurricane Diana, which made landfall near Wilmington, N.C.

It proved to be an experience that “literally changed my life,” Mearns said. That’s because, at the behest of Hine, he decided to make use of an old “side scanner” at USF that was “ancient and broken and sitting on a shelf.” It worked by towing it behind the ship, scanning in both directions, giving readouts of what lay beneath the waves and on the ocean floor.

“A light bulb went off in my head,” said Mearns. He fixed the unit and they used it on the project.

Hine said he had a similar experience while in graduate school, and that he wanted Mearns to have the same. “That’s the best way to learn – say, ‘Here’s a broken toy. Learn how to figure it out and fix it. That’s your job,’” said Hine.

After getting his Masters in 1986,

Mearns joined Eastport International, a company that specialized in what he wanted to do: search and recovery jobs in the ocean. Based in Maryland, Eastport had a government contract to recover American ships and planes lost at sea.

“We could do that down to enormous depths,” said Mearns. “That was our real sort of claim to fame and our specialty. We were the first company to develop an ROV (remotely operated vehicle) that broke the 6,000-meter barrier, which is 20,000 feet. And the key to that is that 97 percent of the oceans are in depths below that.”

Mearns was the only scientist at the company, which was primarily staffed by mechanical and electrical engineers.

“They saw me as their pathway to not just recovering items off the sea bed but finding them because I had this background in high resolution geophysics that I gained at USF,” said Mearns. “I worked there for nine years and it’s a

fantastic job and company and we did all these amazing projects all around the world.”

One of the most interesting – and the one that changed the direction of Mearns’ career – came in 1990, when Eastport International took a commercial job from an insurance company. Their assignment: locate a shipwreck that was at the center of an insurance fraud case, in which an Austrian man was accused of deliberately sinking a ship, the *Lucona*, and killing half the ship’s crew in the process. The sunken vessel was located in the Indian Ocean.

“That was my first major leadership role at sea. And we were successful, we found it. And it put our company on the map,” said Mearns. “That led to a whole string of deep water projects. It started me on shipwrecks.”

Eastport’s success led to a buyout from their chief competitor, the much-larger Oceaneering International based



Artifacts from the wreck of the *HMAS Sydney*, discovered by Mearns' team on March 17, 2008, five days after the wreckage of the *Kormoran* was located. Above, a World War II poster commemorates the sinking of the Australian hospital ship, *HMAS Centaur*.



Photos by David Mearns, Blue Water Recoveries

out of Houston. Mearns stayed on three more years before moving on to Blue Water Recoveries in the United Kingdom.

Blue Water recruited Mearns to start its new research and search division. It involved not only finding shipwrecks but doing all the archival research about the wrecks, determining the lost ship's cargo, location and story about how it might have sunk.

"It was a completely different thing. I had never done it before, but I knew that's what I wanted to do," said Mearns.

He was encouraged by Von Rosenstiel, a former Nazi soldier who had defected to the United States and fought for the Allies and served as an investigator and translator at the Nuremberg Trials. Mr. Von Rosenstiel, who has since passed away, was a generous philanthropist with an interest in marine science who provided fellowships that have helped numerous USF students.

The two met at the opening of the Knight Oceanographic Research building. "I had a short meeting with Werner, and talking to him crystallized a thought I had in my mind to go out and do something myself," said Mearns.

In Mearns' first two years with Blue Water, they found 12 shipwrecks, most of them British government cargo ships lost during the two world wars.

5 Questions with David Mearns

Q: What is your favorite book?

A: *The Ides of March* by Thorton Wilder

Q: What is your favorite movie?

A: "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"

Q: What is your favorite place in the world?

A: Where I live in West Sussex, one of the most beautiful parts of England.

Q: Who is your favorite athlete?

A: Mohammad Ali

Q: What super power would you like to have?

A: I'd like to be able to go back in time.

Mearns eventually became owner of the company. With his success and reputation, Mearns said he is now "a very specialized consultant hired by governments or private individuals or television companies to put together deepwater expeditions."

Since his graduation, Mearns has kept in touch with Hines and other professors he knows, as well as Peter Betzer, retired-emeritus and first dean of the College of Marine Sciences. Asked how the school has changed since 1986, Mearns immediately responded, "I would never get accepted as a student now!"

Another change mentioned by Mearns is that women now are the majority in a profession that used to be dominated by men, with a 65 percent to 35 percent ratio of women to men. In Mearns' time, it was 80 percent men.

Mearns also noted USF's central role in research efforts after the Deep Horizon oil spill last year in the Gulf of Mexico. "The university was high profile," said Mearns. "Without even being an alumnus I knew the college was right at the heart of it because it was coming through on the Internet every day in terms of what was going on with the science." 