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For shipwreck-hunting crew, a diving passion runs deep

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When the salvage company working to right the *Spiegel Grove* off Key Largo needed help welding the 510-foot ship's hatch covers, a small group of technical divers volunteered its services.

When a marine scientist needed coral samples from 300 feet deep off Fort Pierce's Oculina Bank, the same group collected the samples by hand. For free.

When charterboat fishermen speculated about the identity of a popular fishing wreck 220 feet deep off Islamorada, the same divers explored the wreck and positively identified it.

Who are these masked deep divers who work for nothing, use their own equipment and risk death and decompression sickness?

Meet the Association of Underwater Explorers, led by Michael Barnette, a marine ecologist for the National Marine Fisheries Service in St. Petersburg. The work of Barnette and his loose band of about a dozen mostly professional and technical types is performed strictly on weekends, holidays or whenever they can scrounge some days off. Their passion is going really deep to explore untouched shipwrecks.

"Why not? No one else is doing it," Barnette said. "I'm curious by nature, and it drives me nuts that these things are out there and nobody knows anything about them." The diving Barnette and his friends do is hazardous and expensive. To penetrate the murky depths at 300-plus feet, they wear double tanks filled with Trimix -- a deep-diving gas -- and carry two smaller cylinders strapped to their sides that contain a different mixture for decompression. They also carry lift bags, reels with hundreds of yards of guideline, and underwater scooters for spanning large wrecks quickly. Watching one of these technical divers dropping into the water wearing 100 pounds of gear is like watching an astronaut stepping out into space. And the gear is nearly as expensive -- about \$3,000 for a complete technical diving setup.

"This is not a cheap sport. We try not to think about it," Barnette said.

But the need for backup life support is just as important underwater as it is in space. What if a regulator hose blows out 300 feet below the ocean's surface? You can't just shoot to the top anymore than you could point the space capsule back to Earth. Surfacing too quickly from great depths causes decompression sickness, which can lead to death. So the AUE divers must be equipped with safety systems in case anything goes wrong. So far, nothing has.

"They know what they're doing," said Islamorada dive boat captain Ryan Rae, who has escorted the divers on several trips to what Islamorada locals call the "220 Wreck" due to its depth. "They're good guys. A different breed."

The "220 Wreck" remained unidentified for more than 75 years after it went down about 7½ miles off Islamorada. Locals speculated it was a large ocean liner sunk by a torpedo. Barnette and his group decided to find out. They dived to it last year and were astounded to find a 200-foot-long ship that was upright, intact, and in remarkable condition, with untouched artifacts -- china, running lights, lanterns -- scattered all around the sand. After notifying officials with the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, in whose waters the shipwreck lies, Barnette pored over old newspaper clippings and photographs and contacted maritime archaeologists for clues to the ship's identity. Earlier this year, archaeologist Tane Casserley found a photograph that led to a positive identification: the *Queen of Nassau*, built in England in 1904.

The ship's first incarnation was a Canadian fisheries patrol vessel named the C.G.S. *Canada*. Decommissioned in 1919, the *Canada* was sold in 1924 to prominent Florida businessman Barron Gift Collier Sr., for whom Collier County is named. Collier renamed the ship *Queen of Nassau* and put it into service as an excursion steamer between Miami and Nassau. When business lagged, Collier reportedly made arrangements to sell it to a Mexican company in 1926, with the deal to be completed in Tampa. On the way to Tampa, the ship began taking on water off Islamorada. The crew made it safely onto a lifeboat and watched her go down.

As far as anyone knows, the AUE members are the only humans who have been on board since then. They report a rich variety of marine life -- at least 10 Goliath groupers, a few sharks, a colony of deepwater oysters and lots of small fish.

"It's the closest thing a regular person can do to walking on the moon," said AUE member Joe Citelli of Fort Lauderdale.

John Halas, resource manager for the national marine sanctuary, applauds the group's work in identifying and mapping the wreck. "They're able to go deeper than the rest of us because of their technical diving capability, and that's when they really shine," Halas said. "They're calm, safety-conscious and not cowboys."

The AUE caught the attention recently of Miami-Dade County's artificial reef chief, Brian Flynn, when the group dived to the 256-foot-deep wreck of the *Scott Mason Chaite*, formerly the *Ocean Freeze*, located just north of Pacific Reef. The 297-foot freighter had been sunk as a fishing reef in 1998, but no one had been down to see how it landed on the bottom. AUE members discovered the ship was turned upside down, resting on its stern superstructure, which neither Flynn nor anyone from the marine sanctuary knew. Flynn was so impressed with their initiative that he has asked for their help in developing a regional management plan for deep-water artificial reefs stretching from Fort Pierce to Key West.

Barnette and company are happy to oblige. "The wrecks in deeper water are more visually impressive," he said. "The marine life is more robust. And it's exploration."