MARITIME OBSERVATORY AND UKHO PRESS RELEASE

THE UKHO COLLABORATES TO SUPPORT THE MARITIME OBSERVATORY IN PROTECTING IMPORTANT WRECKS AND NAVAL WAR GRAVES

It was a spring day in May 1916 when 1,285 sailors boarded the battle cruiser HMS Queen Mary, on what became their final voyage. There, in the midst of the North Sea, they took part in the largest naval battle of World War I, the Battle of Jutland. When violent, thunderous explosions ripped through the ship in a shock of flames and smoke, nearly every member of the crew lost their lives, finding their final resting place on the seabed. Just 19 survived. Less than 100 years later, a salvage barge is mercilessly looting the revered wreck, plundering her for precious metals and artefacts, and desecrating the graves of our war heroes.

Their story is far from unique. More than 50 major, well preserved World War II military wrecks representing countless war dead from the United States, Europe, Australia and Japan have disappeared from the Java Sea since 2012. And across the world, the unscrupulous looting of historic shipwrecks is escalating out of control.

Yet putting a stop to the criminal looting of wrecks has been almost impossible – until now. The Maritime Observatory is turning the tables on unauthorised salvage. An unprecedented, not-for-profit collaboration between advanced technology ocean surveillance expert OceanMind, and maritime heritage and advocacy specialist MAST, the Maritime Observatory is changing the game. Together, they are making the invisible, visible, and the unknown, known.

“The threat of looting starts with the wreck’s discovery and, in our generation, they will be gone if we don’t act now” says Jessica Berry, MAST’s CEO. “The Maritime Observatory represents a turning point in the protection of underwater heritage sites. It will empower governments and agencies to protect historic shipwrecks and naval war graves, preventing their disappearance and honouring the memories of those who gave their lives for our freedom.”

Leveraging its proven expertise in combining satellite imagery and data analytics to protect the world’s oceans, OceanMind identifies irregular patterns in vessel activities, cross-referencing with thousands of rules, regulations, and records to identify signs of suspicious activity. Increasingly, the team is looking to artificial intelligence to automate this complex process and enable the real-time identification of suspected illegal looting at scale – 365 days a year, anywhere in the world. Their findings create alerts for MAST’s maritime heritage experts to investigate the issue in more detail, tapping into its specialist knowledge of wreck sites, known salvage players and robust intelligence networks. The teams’ combined, unbiased intelligence is then provided to the relevant authorities and law enforcement bodies to inform decision-making and action.

Underpinning this analysis are critical data sources that help locate salvage vessels, identify them, and place them in context in the marine environment. Key technologies that help achieve this include automatic identification system (AIS) tracking data, synthetic aperture radar (SAR) satellite data, vessel registration data, and maritime charts.

The ADMIRALTY charts available from the UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO) are some of the most detailed and accurate charts in the world, providing essential information that helps place wreck sites in context. The Maritime Observatory is extremely grateful for the collaboration with Tracey Addicott (Sales Manager) at the UKHO providing access to vital charts to support our work protecting important wrecks and naval war graves in UK waters.

“We’re collaborating to protect ocean life and our world heritage,” says Nick Wise, CEO of OceanMind. “Ultimately, we want to be able to watch every wreck – getting the right information to the right people, at the right time – to help eliminate the looting of shipwrecks. This data from the UKHO is essential to help us pinpoint wreck sites and understand vessel behaviour in their vicinity.”