

From Tuesday, September 2, - Friday, September 5, 2003, five AquaMasters went diving on the famous "Empress of Ireland" in Rimouski, Quebec. This wreck is located in a remote region on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River about 18 hours from Cleveland, OH. Fortunately, all members had previously been diving in Kingston, Ontario, which is only 9 hours from Rimouski, and a casual 1-1/2 days were taken to drive the remaining distance. Along the way we dined at midnight at a sidewalk cafe among the bustling night life of Montreal, and we toured the historic and quaint medieval-appearing hilltop town of Quebec City, complete with fortifications and a sweeping view of the St. Lawrence River from high above on the cliffs.

The divers were Jacques Girouard, Mark Miller, Mark Siebert, Cindy LaRosa, and Kevin Magee. Jacques is originally French-Canadian, and he served as our interpreter and tour guide. Quebec is a French-speaking province, and all signs, menus, etc. are in French. We noted that unlike Ontario, which has dual-language signs, no such thing exists in Quebec. It was really like being in a foreign country, and we found that in many areas, most people couldn't speak any English. So, having a French speaker among you is very helpful. We also found that the journey to the "Empress" is half the charm and should not be missed. Even ashore between dives, we found the local scenery beautiful and the people to be warm and friendly, even if we couldn't always communicate.

The "Empress of Ireland" was a large 570' ocean liner that tragically sank at midnight on May 29, 1914, only two years after the sinking of the "Titanic." It collided with the freighter "Storstad" in a thick fog bank and sank very quickly, giving little time to launch lifeboats. Out of the 1477 passengers aboard, 1012 died, making the passenger loss of life larger than the "Titanic's." Overall, it ranks as the third greatest maritime tragedy behind the "Titanic" and "Lusitania." The "Empress" is little remembered today because it was quickly overshadowed by the start of an even bigger tragedy, World War I. However, it remains the only recreational-depth ocean liner in the world, and it is an incredibly impressive and historic wreck to dive.

The "Empress" sank on its starboard side with its bow pointed NE in 135' of water. The top of the wreck is the port railing at 80', and the wreck is only 4 miles from shore. Our charter captain was Jean-Pierre Bouillon, a famous diver of the "Empress" who was crippled in the early 1990's by a spinal cord bends hit while helping to clean out wine bottles at the stern before the wreck became a protected site. Although partially paralyzed, he is still able to run a boat. His knowledge of the wreck is invaluable, and he has blueprints of the wreck with inked correction of its current state on the bottom. Jean-Pierre also speaks almost no English, so an interpreter is recommended. We used Jean-Pierre's charter boat the "Marie A.B.," a 27' Cris Craft. Because it is a small boat, everyone geared up on shore and put their tanks in the forward cuddy cabin to balance the boat during the trip. Two people at a time could gear up on the engine cover at the stern.

We quickly found the challenge of diving the "Empress" is not the depth or size of the ship, but the conditions under which it must be dove. The St. Lawrence River is actually more of an ocean bay and is 30 miles wide at this point. The water is mostly salty, meaning extra weight must be worn, and the site is subject to strong tidal currents. Diving is only done during slack tide, which occurs twice a day at different times. What we found slack tide really means is LESS current. The current was usually about one knot, which is impossible to swim against. To dive, one holds onto a rope from the time you roll off the side of the boat until you reach the bottom on the sheltered side of the wreck. After rolling off and being pulled back to the side of the boat by the rope you were holding, you use a knotted full-length granny line to reach the mooring line at the bow of the boat. Then you use the mooring line to go up and down to the wreck. If you let go, you will be swept away.

And spending a lot of time in the water waiting for a boat to find you and pick you up leads to the other challenge of diving the "Empress." Rimouski is located significantly above the top of Maine, and the Labrador Current comes down from the polar cap in this area. Diving the "Empress" is really sub-arctic diving. At surface intervals we would see seals, fin whales, and dolphins, and beluga whales are sometimes spotted in the spring. The air temperature was typically 45-55 deg F with fog, gray overcast, and occasional rain. The water temperature was found to be 40 deg F on the surface with a small thermocline at 50' and 35 deg F water below it. All decompression diving plans were quickly abandoned after seeing how cold the water really was and how much effort was required to hold onto the mooring line. Instead, everyone just dove 28-30% nitrox and tried to keep out of decompression by riding their computers. No one stayed in the water for more than 35-40 minutes, and bottom times of 15-25 minutes were the norm.

However, we were very fortunate with the topside weather. We had four straight days of diving with calm 0' - 1' seas, and a couple of days we even had sunshine and 60 deg F air temperatures. Apparently, the weather is not always this cooperative, and dives can be blown out for days at a time by large, stormy seas. We were also fortunate that the slack tide we dove was the low tide, which travels east towards the ocean, making the deck of the wreck the protected side. This allows most of the interesting features of the wreck to be explored. On the last day, we had very slow currents and were able to get over to the hull side to briefly explore it. We also had great visibility on all days with 15'-25' of viz and dim but ambient lighting conditions, even on the bottom at 135'.

There are 3 moorings on the wreck, one at the bow, one amidships, and one at the stern. The stern mooring was always occupied by a large fishing trawler being used by the Discovery Channel to film diving on the wreck. We chose the amidships mooring because of its central location. Aft of the mooring is a large salvage hole cut in 1914 to obtain the purser's safe, and forward of the mooring

is a large cargo well with a cargo hold opening. Inside the cargo well can be found plaques to the victims - both original and diver. There are also four large winches. Windows and doors are located on the forward and aft walls of the well and can serve as access to the ship's interior. Up on the forecastle can be found a fallen mast going outwards towards the bottom with its stylish crows nest still attached along its length. Also on the forecastle were more winches, a very large capstan, sheerwater wall, and a small anchor crane at the extreme bow. Both Navy-style (stockless) bow anchors are stowed in their hawseholes on the sides of the ship, but they appear somewhat archaic and decoratively designed with a curved flourish to their flukes. Above the anchors can be found the name "Empress of Ireland" in raised 2'-tall brass letters on the side of the ship. Because of these features, the bow is the most interesting part of the ship. It is also fairly accessible with depths of 80'-115' on the average.

If one drops down to the centerline of the ship, one discovers the superstructure along the whole length of the ship is missing, leaving many small openings and a raised ledge along the former port wall. Both funnel holes are visible, and what appears to be the stern funnel has fallen to the starboard side. If one drops to the bottom, one can look into the jumble of collapsed superstructure and find many interesting items. Black and white checkerboard floor tile was found in many areas of the ship, including where the Captain's bathroom was once located. The starboard side of the superstructure can also be seen to be somewhat intact near the bottom, and empty lifeboat davits and alcoves for the lifeboats can be found there. Near the bow the skeletal remains of a lifeboat was found with some very interesting artifacts inside and underneath it. Moving towards the stern, the ship was found to be in much worse shape with all its decking removed by earlier salvagers. The wreck just appears to be a jumbled collection of plates and structural beams hanging in space in this area with very little recognizable structure remaining. Because of this, the stern was not heavily explored.

Although the wreck is supposedly in salt water, there are clues that the water is really brackish. The marine fauna on it is not as heavy as on the ocean, and all the original wood decking, railings, masts, and miscellaneous wooden parts remain. The most numerous fauna is what was dubbed "sea tulips," little green stalks with gas bulbs on their ends. There were also lots of rock fish / sculpins / stone fish, conically shaped crabs, starfish, and anemone. Overall, however, the sea life was not so great that it completely covered the wreck. Instead, it mostly covered the wreck in small discrete dots.

Four diving days were done with two dives per day. These dives were usually separated by 2 hours and utilized the same slack tide. The second dive was usually on the "Nipigon," a brand new artificial reef sunk just a month earlier on July 27, 2003, less than a mile from the "Empress" in 100' of water. It is a Canadian warship that has been cleaned and made diver friendly, including having many access/escape holes cut in it. Jean-Pierre was also one of the key

individuals instrumental in organizing this. Because it is so new, there was absolutely no growth on it, and an extra 5' of viz seemed possible because of the bright white-gray paint. It sits perfectly upright on the bottom with its bow N and its deck at 80'. The superstructure reaches to a depth of 60'. It is a very nice, friendly dive without the spooky setting and connotations that the "Empress" has. Penetrations are also very easy to do, and the whole ship was explored inside and out from bow to stern.

Much of the debris from the "Nipigon's" sinking is still aboard, including mounts for cameras, mortars, and a cargo net hanging over the side to allow boarding. Mark Miller found a monkey wrench left behind and recovered it for Jean-Pierre. The walls are covered in spray painted graffiti messages by the volunteers that helped prepare the ship for sinking. A very thick 6" diameter rope mooring goes out from the bow into the blackness, and the stern dug a large hole into the bottom and scooped up several feet of mud onto its aft deck before settling level. The only disappointing part of the wreck was that everything, including guns and bridge equipment, was stripped off of it. However, some of the interior drywall has collapsed to add an extra level of penetration challenge, and some shelves and a serving window/counter were also found inside. The raised helicopter landing deck is interesting, as well as the open helicopter hanger on the back of the ship. Above the hanger the ship's twin smokestacks can be swum down into to gain access to the interior of the wreck. Examining the bridge, some windows are still in place, and some are missing. The wreck makes for a good training ground for those who are new or not confident in diving the "Empress," and it takes some diving pressure off the "Empress" as well.

Overall, this was an absolutely fantastic trip, and everyone had a great time. The diving was new, interesting, and challenging, and the time spent ashore was also fun and interesting. Many thanks to Jacques for organizing this trip and for providing his expert services as an interpreter and guide!