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WRECKS AND WONDERS

**Diving in the Italian Seas,
Mediterranean Sea and Oceans**

Edizioni il Frangente

*There are more shipwrecks at the bottom of a soul
than at the bottom of the sea.*

Victor Hugo

*Life is a shipwreck, but we must not forget
to sing in the lifeboats.*

Voltaire

*We don't dive to escape life.
We dive so life doesn't escape us.*

Anonymous

INTRODUCTION

I'm a wreck diving enthusiast.

I've been one ever since the first time I saw a sunken ship resting beneath the surface. After all, who hasn't dreamt of being a pirate, or a hunter of underwater treasure? That first wreck pulled me straight back to childhood, to stories of adventure on the seven seas. Unlike a pirate, though, I've never felt the urge to take possession of what I find below. I regard those objects and steel plates with the same respect one reserves for artefacts in a museum. The sight of a shipwreck always stirs something inside me, the desire to learn its story, to find out who the men were that fought aboard it, and why it ended up beneath the waves.

When I first saw that wreck lying on the seabed, no one knew what it was. But after months of research, I did. I had learned its name and pieced together the wartime events that led to its sinking. The mystery was solved: it was MAS 423, sunk in 1944 by an aerial bomb.

Since then, I haven't stopped searching for "iron" all over the world. I've taken several courses to dive deeper and explore wrecks out of reach for recreational divers.

But life, as it often does, had some surprises in store for me, some pleasant, others more challenging. A few years ago, I suffered a fractured vertebra in an accident. I didn't give up. I entrusted myself to specialists and kept diving. Six months later, I was in Cuba, among sharks and the remains of the *Nueva Mortera*, in pain but happy. No more trimix: I could no longer dive looking like a Christmas tree, with tanks hanging off every side. Deep wrecks were now out of reach, but so be it.

Then things got worse. I was diagnosed with two tumours and underwent two botched surgeries, coming far too close to death.

Back home, I thought of my father, who had passed away many years earlier. He had been declared terminal seven times, but only gave in on the last. He had lived seven lives, like a cat. How could I settle for less?

Two months later, my oncologist told me I had a 40% chance of making it three years, and a 0% chance of surviving five. She also wanted to operate again due to several metastases. I was to rest, undergo further surgery, and begin another round of chemotherapy, which came with endless side effects. I felt suspended between two worlds.

Then summer arrived. Without telling anyone, my wife and I decided to escape the hospital and spend a few days on the Tuscan coast, in Cecina, breathing in the sea air and eating *caciucco*. But I couldn't even go out in the sun, and the boredom was crushing. What could I do?

The diving friends I'd known for over twenty years were sceptical and shaken by my stories. But then, while my wife shook her head (she knows how stubborn I am), I made up my mind and fetched my gear from the car. I took off my clothes and tightened the dive jacket to protect the horrible scar. Then I looked at them and said:

«Shall we go?».

Their eyes widened. From that moment on, it felt like I'd stepped into a commercial for a dive centre: «Leave it to us, we'll take care of everything!». They carried my tank and weights onto the boat, made sure I was comfortable, offered me water, asked if everything was okay.

I'll never forget it.

So, I kept diving, albeit within (more or less) recreational limits, travelling the world in search of submerged stories. Wherever I go, I inevitably find myself pestering dive centre staff to take me to wrecks, especially ones with a compelling backstory. Then I descend, feel that surge of emotion, and start "talking" to the steel and timber below. I introduce myself, and more often than not, they answers.

Sometimes the story is simple, almost ordinary. Other times, it's a sweeping tale of adventure and tragedy.

This book is a collection of those stories. I wrote it to share them with you and to inspire the same wanderlust I've felt over the years.

There's an aphorism I love, by John Steinbeck:

"People don't take trips, trips take people".

Diving leads you into an alien, astonishing world full of wonders. And if you stop to listen to what a wreck has to say, you also dive deep into the human spirit, into the lives of those who fought, and maybe died, for a cause, for their ship or their crew mates.

They'll tell you stories you'll never forget.

Along with those tales, I've also included five extraordinary naturalistic dives from around the globe, the kind that anchor themselves deep in your memory and never let go.

Oh, and by the way:

The five years have passed.

I'm still here.

Still dreaming of the next journey.

Still researching the next wreck.

Adventures in the Italian Seas



LAKE COMO

Tremezzo, the Wreck of the *Lucia*

We've all found ourselves talking to someone with a deep passion for something. It often leads to boredom, or we just stare at them like they're possessed, while their eyes drift into the vastness of the world they love.

I'm passionate about lake diving.

It's not something most divers enjoy, not even those who dive in the sea, except for a few who live in Northern Italy. It's like riding a motorcycle at night in the rain: cold, dark, nothing visible... and yet? If I truly love riding, I'll do it in any weather, as long as I'm properly equipped.

Since moving to Monferrato, I've missed it terribly. Many of the friends I used to dive with no longer do, whether due to age, health issues, or life simply pulling them in different directions. Perhaps that's why the memories seem sweeter than the reality ever was, remembering dives in all weather conditions, from scorching heat to freezing cold, even snow. They tell of pranks, early morning coffees, sunken adventures in subalpine lakes, and Sunday midday aperitifs, spent discussing the dive, before heading home.

Of course, the discomforts fade over time: the freezing water, the darkness, the zero visibility, fins stuck to icy docks, the contrast between 35°C above and 5°C on the bottom... not to mention fatigue and fear.

But life is always about passion, and when you feel it flowing through your veins, living is a joy.

Many years ago, I learned that on the western shore of Lake Como, there was a sunken wreck, known by local fishermen for attracting fish

and discovered by divers around 1980. I was newly certified and managed to convince some friends to go find it. The directions were vague, our gear suited for the Mediterranean, but the urge to find it was overwhelming.

It was mid-September, arguably the worst time to dive a lake with a sandy bottom. Algae blooms, river sediment, and vegetation can create a dense “plug” that stretches from the surface down to 40 metres. In between, visibility drops to zero, in a murky range from bottle green to pitch black.

There were five of us. On the first dive, we immediately lost each other, ending up as just two. After surfacing and regrouping, we tied ourselves together with a guideline, assuming there would be no currents or hazards.

I found the wreck by slamming my head into its side. The others soon joined. We couldn’t see much: just some planking and the wooden hoops that had once supported a canvas cover protecting a load of small white sacks, seemingly containing flour.

I spotted a couple of large burbot, both startled by the strange big black creatures blowing bubbles on the lakebed.

Still, discovering a wreck in a lake was an exciting experience. But we needed to return in winter, when the water is clearer.

I went back three more times, always in January, and with improved visibility, I realised it wasn’t a *Lucia* at all, it was a *gondola lariana*.

Lake Como, also known as Lario, was for centuries the natural connection between the Po Valley and the Alpine valleys and Switzerland. The roads running along the lake’s edges are relatively recent: the eastern one was commissioned in the late 18th century by Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, and the western one wasn’t completed until the early 20th century. Naturally, then, the lake itself was the primary route for goods and people, criss-crossed by countless sailing or rowing vessels. Two main winds, alternating over these waters, made navigation easier: the Tivano, a northerly morning breeze, and the Brega, a warm,

steady wind from the southern plains that picks up around midday. The lake's waters were teeming with wooden boats forming a dense web of trade routes.

Traditional Larian boats followed a similar construction method. Chestnut, locust, or ash planks were roughly shaped and then "sewn together" using nails driven from one to the next, creating a kind of staple called a *cusidura*. Once the gently curved hull was formed, ribs were added, followed by the outer planking, which was then caulked and tarred inside and out. Decoration was minimal, the boat remained black from the pitch.

There were various models and sizes: the *comballo*, up to 28 metres long, used for cargo; the *navet*, a 7–8 metre fishing boat; and the *batél*, just six metres, nicknamed *Lucia* after the character in Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. Many of these hulls still exist today, preserved in the lake's small harbours and even raced in traditional regattas, drawing large participation from sailors and spectators.

The *gondola lariana* was the largest boat type fitted with hoops to support a canvas cover over the stern, sheltering people and cargo from sun or bad weather. It had a flat bottom, flared rounded sides, a fine bow, and a wide, rounded stern. Length varied from 15 to 20 metres, width around 5 metres, and cargo capacity ranged from 12 to 100 tons. It was propelled by a large square hemp sail and long oars, used in calms or for beaching, which was done directly on shore thanks to a reinforced section called a *dolfin* that acted as a skid. The boat was moored by tying it to a ring after landing. Loading and unloading took place over a wooden plank called the *panca*. This was the most widespread transport vessel on the lake, used for all kinds of cargo. So, despite being commonly referred to as *Lucia*, the wreck at Tremezzo is, in fact, a *gondola lariana*, not a *batél*.

The sinking date is uncertain, but some sources suggest it occurred during the winter of 1910–1911, possibly due to shifting cargo or, more likely, a sudden storm driven by winds sweeping down from the

Valtellina. It may seem unlikely to those unfamiliar with this lake, but the wind and waves on Lake Como can be truly fearsome.

Getting to the dive site is easy: from Como, you follow the SS340 Regina road along the lake to Tremezzo. After entering the town, pass a large hotel and a villa until you reach the Church of San Lorenzo, where there's a convenient parking area. Facing the lake, a staircase to the left leads down to the shore and a small harbour for boats.

Be aware: If you want to dive on the *Lucia*, be mindful of the harbour's location: you'll need a permit, or risk a hefty fine (a lesson I learned the hard way elsewhere). You've been warned.

After gearing up at the shore, descend at the end of the floating dock until you find a mooring block at about 16 metres. Then drop to about 20 metres and follow a bearing of roughly 30 degrees. During my last dive, the wreck seemed much closer to the dock, perhaps the pier had been extended to increase berthing space.

There are no particular difficulties, aside from the chronic lack of visibility due to the extremely fine silt (in January, visibility ranges from 3 to 12 metres, rarely more), the low winter water temperature (6–7°C, so a drysuit is essential), and the possible presence of nets, always worth watching out for.

The hull measures just under 20 metres in length, with a maximum beam of 5.20 and sides about 1.8 metres high. The wreck, lying on its port side, is in excellent condition. The chestnut wood has hardened rather than rotted, thanks to the excellent waterproofing applied during its construction. The bow is beautifully tapered, but the rounded stern is even more striking, with its massive rudder called *guernàc*.

Of the three original hoops over the aft section, two are still in place, while the third lies inside the boat, along with the main mast, which has collapsed to port. The interior is filled with small white sacks which, according to my original source, were thought to contain flour. However, they are hard as concrete and stuck together, suggesting they may actually hold gypsum or lime.

Resting on a sandy bottom, the *Lucia* of Tremezzo teems with life: large burbots, delicate white freshwater sponges, countless molluscs, and schools of perch weaving in and out of what is now their home.

If done with good visibility, the dive is both simple and fascinating; you just need to choose the right season and be a bit lucky. When I dove with my camera, luck wasn't really on my side. But sometimes, the best memories are the ones we carry in our hearts.



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The Last Flight of the Cicogna (the Stork)

«It's time, let's go.»

Marshal Ottavio Aliani, second pilot of the B.R.20M number MM21503, watches his commander turn and walk toward the plane. He crushes his cigarette into the grass of Cascina Vaga airfield, near Pavia. He grimaces, then heads toward the Cicogna — the Stork — as the pilots affectionately call it. “Though in truth,” Aliani thinks, “it doesn't really look much like a stork, and it carries bombs, not babies.”

There is wind in the air, unusually cool for the season, and threatening clouds loom on the horizon. Not just weather-related: it's June 13, 1940, and only three days earlier Mussolini, speaking from Palazzo Venezia, had declared war on England and France. The *Stork* is on its way to bomb them: its mission is the military airfield at Fayence, not far from Cannes, on the Côte d'Azur.

Aliani feels a shiver run down his spine. He takes comfort in looking at his commander, Simone Catalano, in whom he places all his trust. Catalano, born in Paparella near Trapani thirty-five years earlier, is an experienced pilot: a volunteer in the Aviazione Legionaria during the Spanish Civil War, he had been decorated for bravery with both bronze and silver medals for valorous actions, always flying a B.R.20 under heavy fire from flak and enemy fighters. There was no one better to follow into war and still hope to make it home alive.

Around the aircraft Aliani sees the other three crewmen: radio operator Salvatore Gaeta, gunner Tommaso Ferrari, and mechanic Farris, three fine young men. Lieutenant Catalano glances at them briefly, then smiles. «I know it's tough. You're thinking of your wives and chil-

dren. But the *Stork* is a tough old bird, I know from experience, and it will bring us home. Let's go.»

The men exchange glances, a silent caress, and relax. After all, they had already been baptised the night before, bombing Toulon airfield in the middle of a terrifying storm, without even the company of the moon. They climb aboard and take their places. Other twin-engined bombers are preparing for takeoff as well. Soon, the MM21503, 43rd Group, 13th Wing, taxis down the runway and takes off, with its usual slight yaw, on its mission of war. It is 9:23 a.m.

The B.R.20M was a modified version of a twin-engine, low-wing bomber built by Fiat Aviazione in the 1930s. At the time of its debut in 1936, it was considered an excellent aircraft, enough to be sold to Japan in eighty-five units, destined for the war against China. It was a sturdy aircraft, the first Italian bomber built with an entirely metal structure and wings. A second-generation aeroplane, the successor to the old biplanes, a series of aircraft that nevertheless had only a brief existence before being quickly overtaken by far more advanced machines.

The B.R.20M had a wingspan of 21.56 metres and a length of 16.10. It was powered by two Fiat A80RC41 radial engines, giving it a maximum speed of 432 kilometres per hour at 5,000 metres, though its speed dropped considerably at lower altitudes, and a range of 3,000 kilometres. Its standard crew was five men. It normally carried 1,000 kilos of bombs, which could be increased to 1,600 for shorter flights. Its defensive armament consisted of three turrets with machine guns: the nose and central turrets mounted 7.7 mm Breda-SAFATs, while the dorsal turret carried a 12.7 mm Breda-SAFAT.

During the Spanish Civil War, it had proven itself, performing honourably. But technology advanced quickly, and by 1940 the Cicogna was already obsolete. It was slow, clumsy, with poor range and highly vulnerable to enemy fire. Its fabric covering was so thin that bullets passed through without even making a sound. It tended to yaw during

takeoff and landing; its engines vibrated violently and were unreliable; it was prone to ice formation on the wings, and its navigation systems were outdated. Its machine guns were underpowered, prone to jamming, and mounted on poorly designed turrets. In short, it was old, ineffective, and unsafe for its crew.

In September 1940, under German pressure, it briefly took part in the Battle of Britain. Of eighty aircraft sent, twenty were lost: only three were shot down by British fighters, while seventeen crashed due to technical failures. It was soon relegated to training and reconnaissance roles.

On June 13, 1940, however, the crew of MM21503 were unaware of these limitations, since they had yet to face the enemy. They would learn soon enough.

The mission had long been planned by Italian generals: the bombing of the French airfields at Fayence, Hyères, and Saint-Mandrier-sur-Mer, with aircraft departing from Cameri, Lonate Pozzolo, San Damiano di Piacenza, and Cascina Vaga, escorted by C.R.42 biplane fighters from two Piedmont airfields. Old, slow, poorly armed planes: success depended only on surprise and luck.

At first, luck was on the Italians' side: the initial bombers reached their targets escorted by the C.R.42s. Flak was ineffective, and French fighter activity was minimal. But not for the unlucky 43rd Group: they ran into a storm and arrived ten minutes late, just enough to force their escorting fighters to return to base, their small tanks already dry.

It is 11:15. Now the anti-aircraft batteries are doing their job. The crews barely have time to release their bombs before turning for home, when from the clouds emerge three Dewoitine D.520s, commanded by air ace Pierre Le Gloan. Modern, fast, well-armoured, heavily armed planes, death itself descending from above for the Italians.

They attack three Cicogna flying slightly apart from the others. The first is riddled with machine-gun fire that kills the pilot and badly wounds the rest of the crew. Co-pilot Raffaele Bruni, however, miraculously manages to escape and bring the aircraft back to Cascina Vaga.

The second is hit hard: its pilot, Lieutenant Aldo Sammartano, is sucked out through a gaping hole torn in the cockpit, plunging into the void. The bomber crashes, and the rest of the crew, parachuting down, are shot or lynched by the mob. Only airman Natale Vannuzzo survives, landing in the garden of an elderly woman who shields him from the furious crowd and hands him over to the French gendarmes.

Meanwhile, MM21503 is repeatedly hit by Le Gloan. The dorsal gun is knocked out, Lieutenant Catalano is gravely wounded, and the right engine is ablaze. The situation is dire. The French fighters return to base, but the bomber cannot cross the Alps. Catalano decides to follow the coast and try to re-enter Italy over the sea, hoping for a forced water landing. He continues piloting as long as he can, and when he faints, Aliani takes the controls of the battered plane. The left engine sputters and loses power but keeps running. The second pilot manages to cross the border, pass Ventimiglia and Sanremo, but then the engine fails. They must ditch.

The aircraft slams into the water several times but holds together until its nose crashes hard into a wave. Ottavio Aliani and mechanic Farris survive and try desperately to free Lieutenant Catalano before the Stork sinks, but it is impossible. The B.R.20M vanishes beneath the waves, taking with it its pilot, gunner Ferrari, and radio operator Gaeta. Off Santo Stefano al Mare, near Imperia, the two survivors remain in the water for a couple of hours before being rescued.

The bodies of the three lost men are never recovered. Simone Catalano is posthumously awarded the Gold Medal of Military Valour.

For wreck divers, aeroplanes are strange creatures: they don't belong down there. A machine of the air resting in an ocean of water. They are also rare finds, given their fragility, usually the violent impact with the sea destroys them completely.

They are also smaller than ships: you can take them in with a few fin strokes, then linger over their details. The B.R.20M of Santo Stefano

al Mare is among the most fascinating and best-known aircraft wrecks in the diving world. Almost completely intact — aside from the fabric coverings, the wooden parts, and the nose crushed by impact — it was long considered the last survivor, until another was discovered in the waters off San Leone, Agrigento, which will likely be recovered and displayed in a museum.

I have visited it more than once, thanks to the nearby presence of an excellent dive centre equipped with a comfortable wooden boat, ideal even for cold winter days.

Often there is a strong surface current that forces you to kick hard and descend along the line, but it also sweeps the bottom clear, giving extraordinary visibility that lets you see the wreck from as shallow as 20 metres.

It is a challenging dive, not for everyone, with a square profile at 47 metres depth. Even with a hyper-oxygenated mix like nitrox 26%, at least 10–15 minutes of decompression are required.

The wreck, however, is a spectacle: it has become an oasis of life and colour, with its struts thick with yellow and red sponges sheltering lobsters, crayfish, conger eels, and many well-camouflaged scorpionfish. If you are lucky, it is often home to one or two catsharks.

Two images remain etched in memory: the radial engines with their bent propellers resting on the sandy seabed, and the turret with its machine gun still pointed toward the surface. Beneath it, a box full of ammunition can be seen, intended for enemy aircraft, but instead left on the sea floor.

Ascending slowly along the line back to the boat, the Stork seems displayed in an underwater museum, a memorial and a warning against the follies of war.



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