

Treasure hunter fights to keep £32m hoard of sunken silver



With a cargo of 2,364 bars of silver, the SS Tilawa survived the first torpedo attack by a Japanese submarine on a moonlit night in 1942. A second, however, sent her to the bottom of the Indian Ocean.

A secret salvage operation organised by a champion racing driver has now led to a court fight over the ownership of the 60 tonnes of treasure seemingly lost that night when the British India Steam Company liner was attacked 930 miles northeast of the Seychelles.

Contemporary reports told how the first explosion created panic among the 732 passengers, many of whom died in the rush to lifeboats. The ship remained afloat but, as the survivors attempted to reboard, the second torpedo struck. In all, 281 passengers and crew were lost.

In the cargo holds were silver bars valued at £32 million being shipped from Bombay to the South African Mint to produce coins.

The ship and its precious cargo were largely forgotten until Ross Hyett, 67, a champion racing driver and former executive director of the British Racing Drivers' Club, set up Argentum Exploration in London in 2012 to locate shipwrecks lying at depths that had precluded salvage until then. His company hired Advanced Maritime Services to find the wreck of the Tilawa, which they did in December 2014. After two years of planning, a recovery began in January 2017 using the salvage ship Seabed Worker. The secret operation took six months and whenever the salvage ship entered the Omani port of Salalah for supplies the recovered silver was hidden in a basket lowered to the seabed in international waters to avoid it being seized.

The bars were shipped to Southampton via the Cape of Good Hope so that they would not enter Egyptian territorial waters through the Suez Canal. They were declared to the Receiver of Wreck, which oversees salvage law, and are kept in a secure warehouse.

The company believed the only possible claim would come from the UK government, which owned the wreck as a result of insurance arrangements. However, word had reached the South African government.

Yesterday Sir Nigel Teare, a judge at the Admiralty Court in London, compared the case to *Buccaneer*, a board game featuring rival treasure hunters.

The dispute was further complicated by a rival US salvage firm striking a deal with the South African authorities to locate the silver, unaware it had already been found by Mr Hyett. A representative of Odyssey Marine Exploration in Florida had approached them in September 2016. Under the plan, the South African government would receive 15 per cent of the value of the silver.

Yesterday Sir Nigel was asked to rule whether the silver had been intended for commercial enterprise or sovereign purpose, which the South African government claimed would give it state immunity and full ownership of the cargo.

Sir Nigel ruled that the bars were intended for commercial purposes and concluded: "The silver had, in all probability, been forgotten about until 2016 when the Republic of South Africa was informed of its existence by Odyssey."

Mr Hyett is in discussion with the South Africans.

David Brown, Chief News Correspondent.

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