

Diver Solves Mystery Wreck Of Bedwell Bay

By Bill Burnyeat, *Now Newspaper*, February 1984.

Bedwell Bay is only four kilometers from Port Moody's April Road. It's a tranquil setting, perfect for casual boat trips, water skiing and picnics.

Most sightseers and boaters are content to spend a quiet afternoon and leave — never guessing they may have passed within a few dozen metres of the mystery wreck of Bedwell Bay.

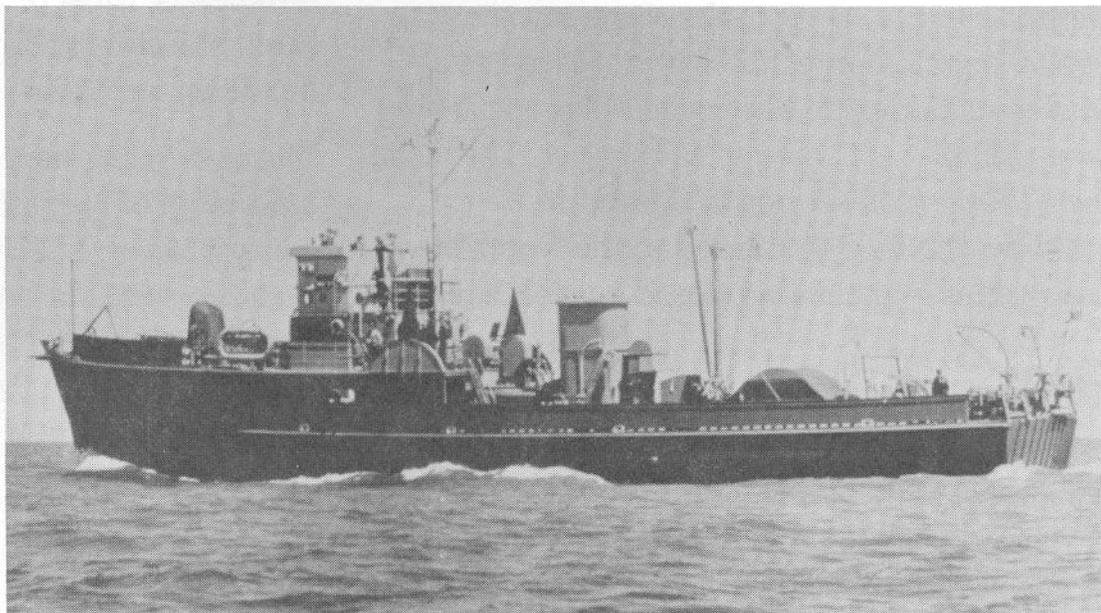
The story of the mystery wreck goes back to 1943. It was the height of the war and naval yards all over the world were turning out war ships.

One of these was an *American Yard Class Minesweeper* (YMS) known only by the number 159. It was one of 481 YMS motor minesweepers used to clear the way for amphibious assaults taking place on the far-flung battle fields of the Far East.

The YMS-159 was 136 feet long with a six-foot draft. Equipped with twin diesels, the vessel had a steel superstructure built over a wood hull.

The wooden hull was to prevent the craft becoming a target for magnetic mines. The 159 carried a 90-mm cannon on its fore-deck and a pair of 20mm machine guns aft.

When commissioned as a ship in the US Navy, the 159 would have looked like its sister ship the YMS-158, which is the only similar vessel whose photograph survives.



*YMS-158, identical sister ship to the former minesweeper VT-100.
Courtesy of Burger Boat Company Inc.*

YMS-158, a sister ship to the VT-100, gives an idea of what the vessel looked like when fully fitted for mine-sweeping duties.

After the war, the 159 is next heard of as an undocumented foreign vessel operating in Canadian waters.

The year was now 1955. The 159 had survived the war and reappeared in BC, with both a new name and a new job. It was called VT-100 to designate it as Vancouver Tugboat number 100. Stripped of much of its superstructure and engines, the vessel was to be used as a woodchip barge. The VT-100 was moored at Bedwell Bay, where a number of other decommissioned war ships were berthed.

But the VT-100's career was to be short lived. On April 22nd, 1956, vandals started a fire on board — a fire which quickly spread to the nearby *Victoria*, a 300-foot former passenger liner, owned by Straits Towing. Two fire-fighting tugs were soon on the scene and the *Victoria* was saved. The VT-100, however, could not be extinguished, burned to the waterline, sinking in 15 metres of water.

Several years before the sinking, a second retired war ship, the *HMS Cranbrook*, also called Bedwell Bay home. And it was the memory of the *Cranbrook*, a Canadian minesweeper, that made an impression on later visitors to the Bay.

Soon the myth was born. It was said the *Cranbrook* sits at the bottom of Bedwell Bay.

Jacques Marc, a local diver and member of the *New West Aquanuts Club*, was skeptical.

For years local divers had been exploring the remains of what they unanimously called the *Cranbrook*. Marc decided to check the claim.

Marc, a 27-year-old employee of the Burnaby office of the provincial *Ministry of Forests*, was the first to try to determine the actual fate of the *Cranbrook*. He learned the ship had been purchased by two Nanaimo men, who in turn sold the craft to a Mexican fish cannery. One of the men said he helped sail the *Cranbrook* down the west coast of the continent to deliver it to the buyers.

Having been temporarily stumped, Marc made use of the *City of Vancouver* archives, the public library and lists of ships registered in Canada to track down the identity of the wreck.

He finally came across a clipping in a Vancouver daily newspaper which named the VT-100 as sinking in the 1956 fire.

He pieced together the rest of this story through correspondence with the original manufacturer and the US Navy.

In one humorous letter, received last year, a Navy spokesman told Marc the specifications of ships are not released due to national security. This, even though the last vessel of its type was struck from Navy lists in 1969. The ships last saw action during the Korean War.

Since its sinking, the VT-100 has been a favorite spot for numerous dives and is a favorite spot to introduce novice divers to diving on wrecks.

“Practically every weekend there is somebody out there,” Marc said.

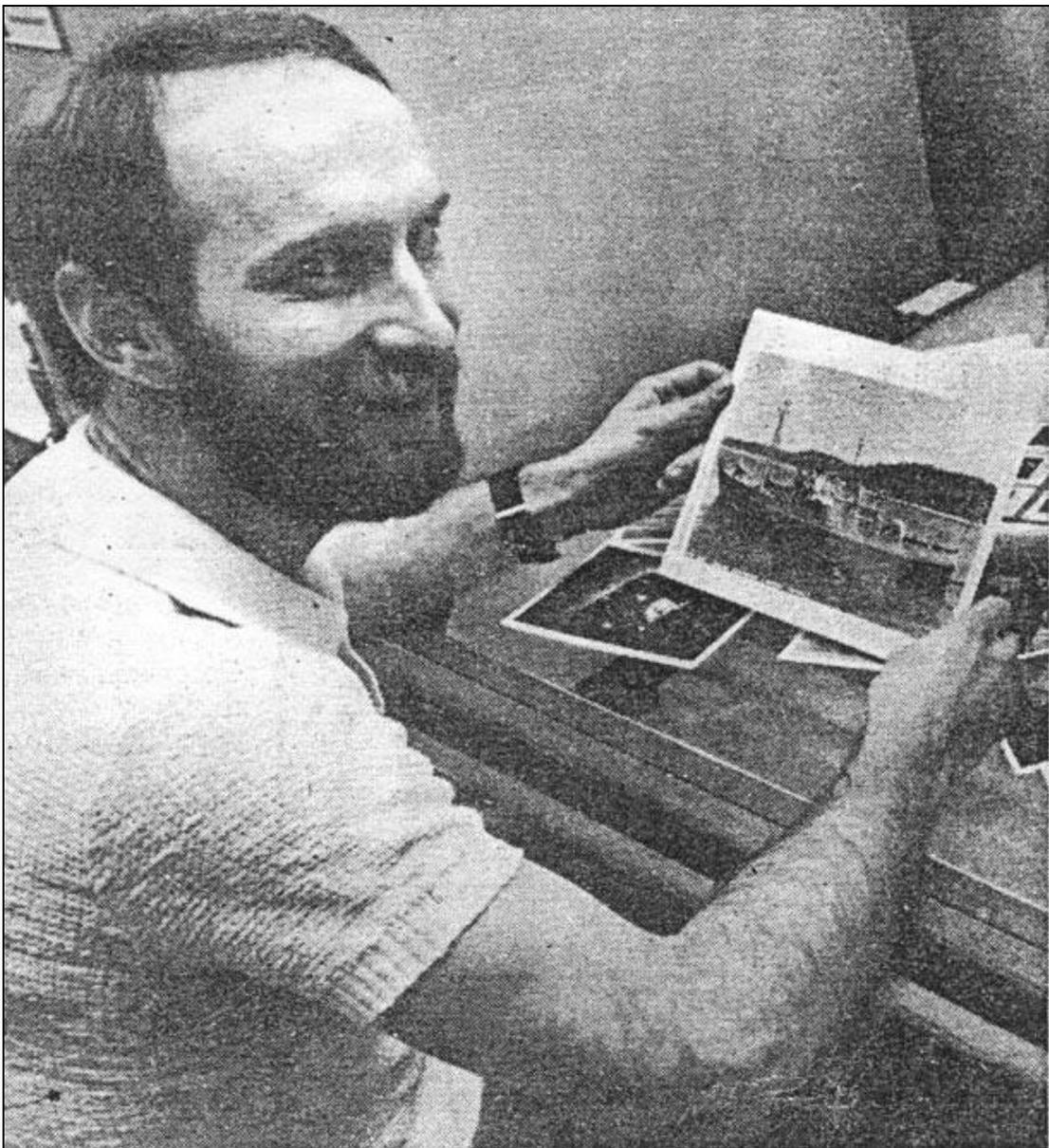
Twenty-eight years after it sank the VT-100 is little changed, he said. A forward turret, which once held the 90 mm cannon, is plainly visible. Much of the ship remains intact, although three decades of salvagers after brass and mechanical parts — have stripped the vessel of much of its fixtures.

As a member of the *Underwater Archaeological Society of B.C.*, Marc deplors the activities of “treasure hunters.”

“It’s like going to an (archaeological) dig and taking away all the arrowheads,” he said.

He also has a word of warning for divers. The VT-100 should not be entered since a diver could become trapped inside.

“The bow is eroded. Only a few ribs hold the upper deck on. It’s a safe dive, but if you got in there and the deck came down, you couldn’t get out.”



Jacques Marc with slide and photos of underwater expeditions.

Editor's Note:

Following posting of this 1984 newspaper article on the Belcarra website (www.belcarra.ca), in the fall of 2003, the undersigned was contacted by Mr. Rene Westerhuis of *The Netherlands* who is researching the history of the YMS Yard Class Minesweepers. Mr. Westerhuis has a website (www.yardminesweeper.tk) that has considerable information on these venerable warships from the Second World War. His website also has a link to another website that is dedicated to the YMS-159 and managed by Bob Burch who served on board the YMS-159 in 1945 and 1946 (<http://www.geocities.com/rburch992/ymshistory.html>). Communications with Rene Westerhuis subsequently led to contact with Jacques Marc who researched the "Mystery Wreck Of Bedwell Bay", and Mr. Marc kindly provided the *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia* (UASBC) document (below), wreck location map, wreck plan drawing, and underwater photographs of the VT-100 (YMS-159) that appear herewith this article.

Ralph Drew, Editor

USS YMS-159

Built By:

Burger Boat Co.
Manitowac, Wis., USA

Material: Wood

Length: 136'

Breath: 24' 6"

Pacific Fleet Postings:

1943 – Marshall Islands
1944 – Eniwetok
1945 – Coral Head, Bikini Atoll
1945 – Rongelap, Bikini,
Majuro, Maloelap, Epon,
Utirik, and Ailinglaplap
Islands.

Decommissioned:

22 July 1946

Sold:

22 January 1947
Oceanic Fisheries Co.



Source: John D. Davis – Former YMS-159 crewmember.

YMS-159 Yard Minesweeper

BEDWELL BAY WRECK — VT-100 (YMS-159)

“Vancouver’s Undersea Heritage – Shipwrecks and Submerged Cultural Sites in Burrard Inlet and Howe Sound”, *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia*, 1994, pages 61-64.

Official Number: 198108

Registry: Canada

CONSTRUCTION

This vessel originated as a World War II minesweeper. She was built by the *Burger Boat Company* of Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Her keel was laid in August 1942, she was launched at the start of 1943, and she was completed that June.

She was one of 481 Yard Class minesweepers. *U.S. Navy* specifications listed her as 136 feet long overall, 22.9 feet in breadth, 6.3 feet deep, and 245 tons displacement. Twin shaft diesels rated at 800 brake horsepower produced 15 knots and a cruising range of 1000 miles. Her particular sub-class had one funnel; others had two or none. Armaments typically were one 3.5inch gun on the foredeck and two 20 mm machine guns behind the bridge. The aft deck was occupied by sweeping gear. Her crew numbered three officers and 24 enlisted men.

YMS-class ships were intended for harbour defence but many were sent overseas to sweep beaches during amphibious landings. Developed in 1940, they were inspired by a British design and were intended to use an existing subchaser hull. The advent of magnetic mines changed that. A much larger hull evolved to accommodate a magnetic sweep and a third diesel to run it. Contrary to popular misconception, these craft were built of wood for simplicity only; the need for non-magnetic hulls did not develop until after the war. They had particularly strong hulls, however, in case any mines went off close by.

After the war she was converted to civilian use. She was a barge by the time she was first registered in Canada. Her papers then listed her as 137.4 feet in overall length, 25.1 feet across, and 10.3 feet deep. She displaced 290 tons. Her engines and superstructure were gone but she retained one deck, one mast, seven bulkheads, a raked stem, transom stern, and carvel planking.

OPERATIONAL HISTORY

She was commissioned into the *U.S. Navy* on July 1, 1943 at New Orleans. Designated *YMS-159*, she was put under the command of Lieutenant A. Goodhue, *U.S.N. Reserve*. In September she reported for duty at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. She transferred to the Pacific Fleet in August 1944. Like most of the small craft which bore only numbers rather than names, her service records are minimal. The sole subsequent entry is that she grounded on a coral head at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands in September 1945. After repairs at Eniwetok, she returned Stateside.

YMS-159 was struck from the Navy list in 1946. She was sold to the *Oceanic Fisheries Company* at Nordland, Washington, early the next year. The *Vancouver Tug Boat Company* bought her on January 3, 1955. She was registered in Vancouver as the barge *V.T. No. 100*. Her background was either unknown or deemed unimportant: she was listed as an undocumented foreign vessel. Technically, she was owned by Harold Jones, a Vancouver Tug director, and he chartered her to the firm. She was a short-lived investment.

LOSS

On April 22, 1956, the *VT-100* was moored alongside some other hulks at Bedwell Bay. Vandals apparently rowed out that afternoon, boarded, and set her afire. Shore pumps and two fire-fighting tugs rushed to the scene but the *VT100* was a hopeless inferno. Flames spread to a larger vessel alongside, the former passenger ship *Victoria*. All efforts turned to saving her. The blaze on the *Victoria* took six hours to subdue. Meanwhile, the *VT-100* burned to the waterline and sank. Her register was closed a week later.

SALVAGE

The wreck has been stripped by salvors and sport divers almost since she went down. A salvage diver dynamited off her propellers and shafts.

SEARCH / DISCOVERY

The *VT-100* has been dived for decades. Once she was probably the most popular shipwreck in BC. Her main attraction was that she was the only one accessible from shore in the Vancouver area.

The vessel was, and often still is, misidentified as *H.M.C.S. Cranbrook*. That Canadian minesweeper was moored at Bedwell Bay by the *War Assets Disposal Commission* before she was sold and sent to Mexico in 1947. Jacques Marc, later UASBC Explorations Director, discovered the wreck's true identity as the *VT-100* in 1983.

STATUS

UASBC has worked on the wreck periodically since 1983. The *Burrard Inlet/Howe Sound Survey* added two expeditions in 1990 and 1992.

The wreck lies about 300 metres off the eastern shore of Bedwell Bay in Indian Arm. Latitude and longitude are 49° 19.3' W, by 122° 54.49' N. She faces southwest on about a 230° heading, listing to port on a sloping mud bottom. Depths are 55 feet at the bow, 42 feet at the stern. The wreck hosts calcareous tubeworms, sea anemones, perch, and small rockfish but marine life is not abundant. Visibility is frequently poor due to algae blooms and stirred-up silt.

The ship's ends retain their original height. Amidships, where she burned to the waterline, she rises only a metre or so above the mud. Her planking is badly rotted and gaps have become more numerous in the past decade. In many places one can see the wooden frames inside, supplemented by occasional steel frames and bulkheads. Most of the deck was gone before she sank. She still has her steering gear, including a quadrant and twin rudders.

The craft is segmented by eight steel bulkheads. Two pairs of fuel tanks occupy the aft compartment. Miscellaneous gear litters the midship sections, including electrical equipment, and a water tank. One bulkhead curves behind the gun platform. Panelling remains only on its port side; the rest is just girders.

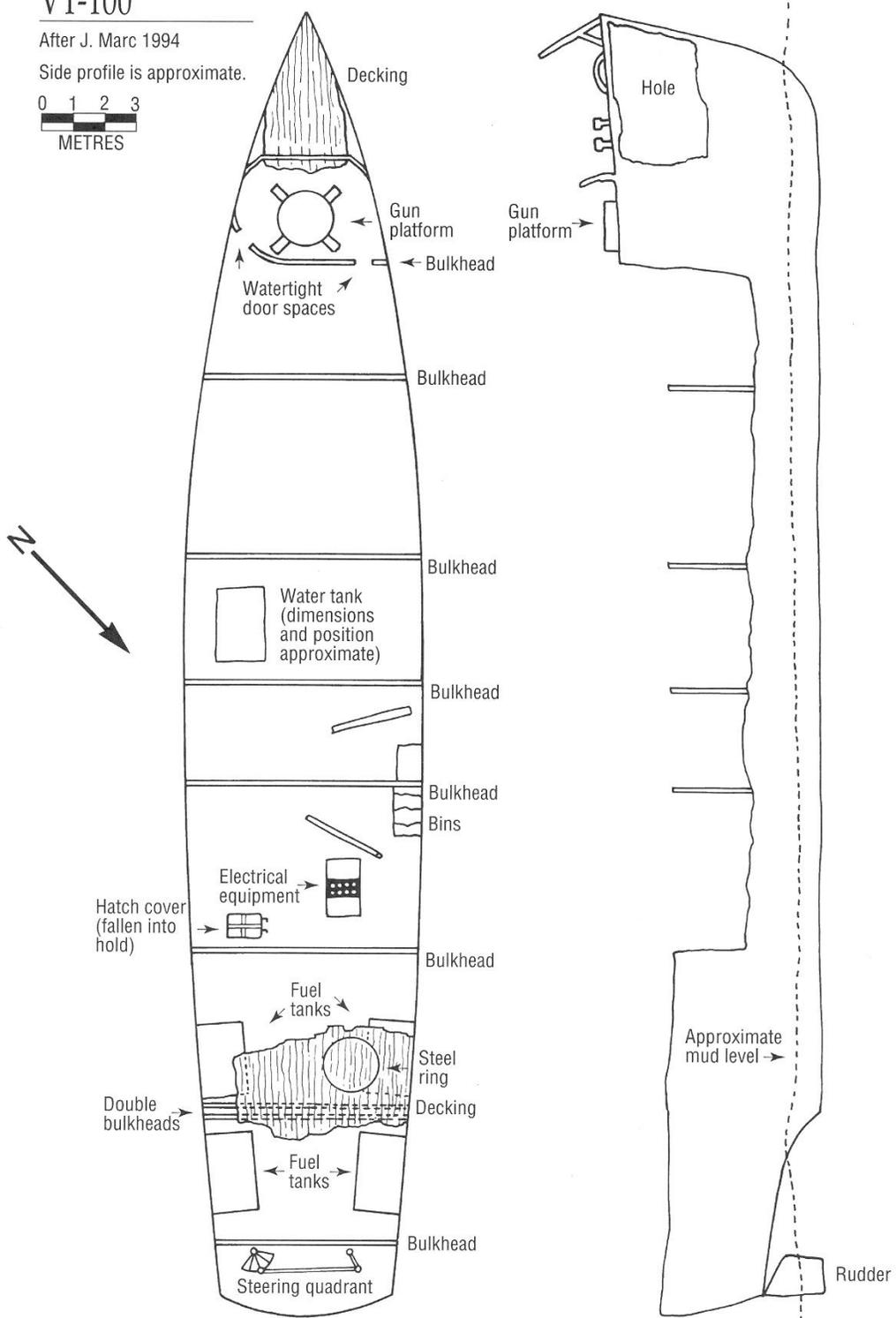
The round steel gun platform is a notable feature. It stands on four splayed legs as tall as the bulkheads. The fire apparently burned out at this point since the side planking abruptly rises to foredeck level. Further on there is a ridge or spray shield across the deck. Its front wall drops down through the ship to form a bulkhead, with a hatchway through on the port side.

The forecastle deck survives except at the edges. The only thing holding it up, though, is the stempost. The topsides have completely rotted away as far back as the bulkhead, leaving big holes in both bows. When a diver tugged the deck, the whole thing shook. The forecastle's strength and longevity is highly suspect.

VT-100

After J. Marc 1994

Side profile is approximate.



Source: Jacques Marc, UASBC

YMS-159 (VT-100) Wreck Plan Drawing — Jacques Marc 1994

CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

The *VT-100* was not historic. It remains a popular recreational spot, though diver pressure has been eased by the opening of *Porteau Cove Provincial Park*. Porteau's *Nakaya* was a YMS-class minesweeper very similar to this one.

Our survey shows that the wreck's structural integrity is dubious, especially at the bow. Divers should not penetrate the forecastle. The Society recommends that the wreck's stability be monitored. Consultation with corrosion experts will be necessary to ensure that testing procedures are comprehensive and sound.

Reputedly, a consultant's report to the *Greater Vancouver Regional District* or *Vancouver Port Corporation* recommended that the wreck be destroyed. This was justified partly by the potential hazard to divers and partly as a way to resolve a user conflict. The *Vancouver Water Ski Club* has a course near the wreck. There were concerns that divers might pop up in front of skiers. The issue seems to have subsided and the proposal to destroy the wreck has not been pursued in the past four years. There was also friction between divers and local residents over scarce parking space. Belcarra municipality might have solved that when it dumped tons of rubble on the old trail to the beach. Divers now enter further south and face a long swim to the wreck. UASBC recommends that diver organizations address these issues through discussions with other stakeholders. The Society believes that diver access and the shipwreck's preservation should be safeguarded.

REFERENCES

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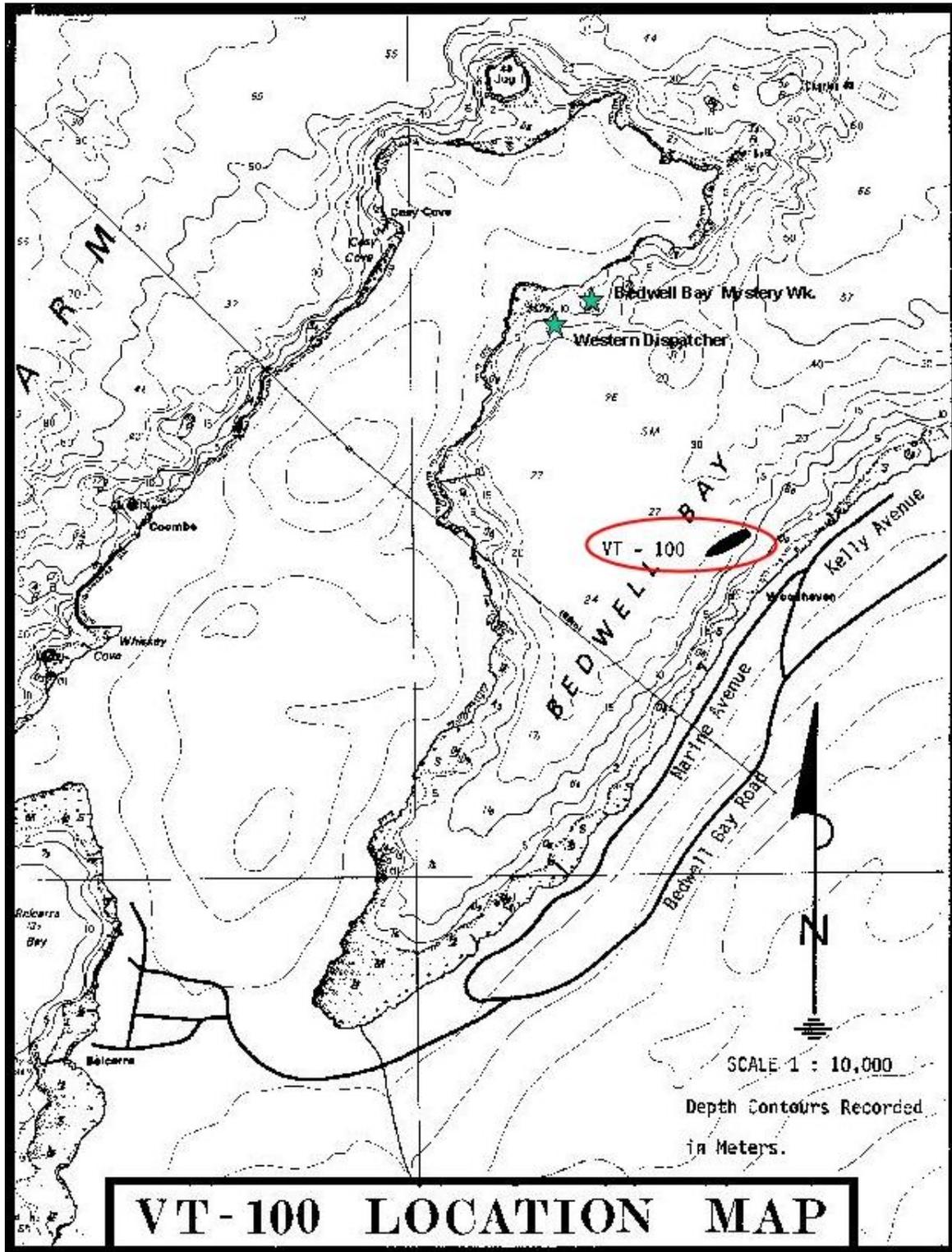
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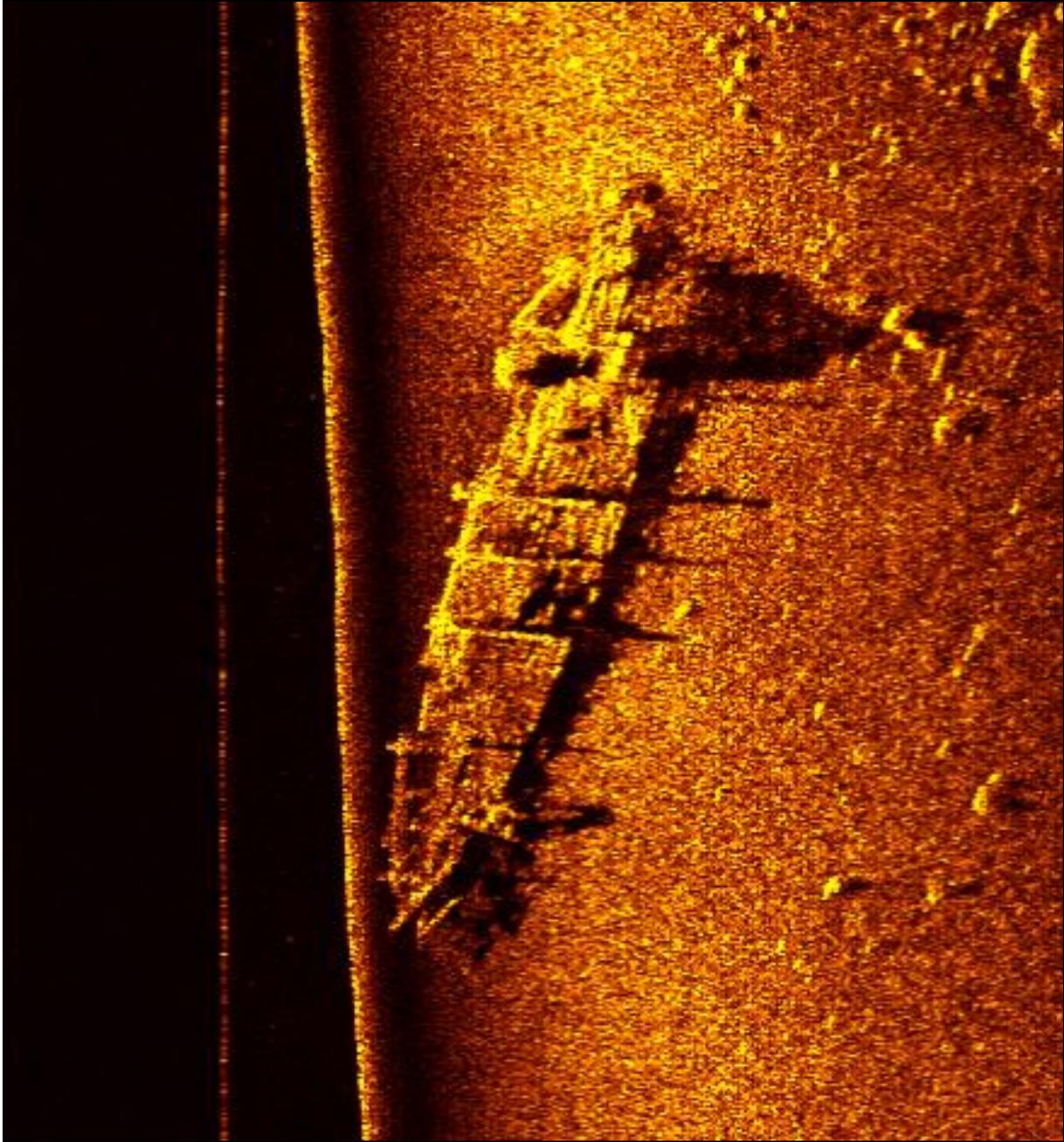
Vancouver Sun, April 23, 1956.

"V.T. No. 100", Vancouver Ship Registry Office, Vol. 34, Entry 33.



Source: Jacques Marc, UASBC

Bedwell Bay Wreck YMS-159 (VT-100) Location Map



Source: Sidescan sonar image courtesy of Imagenex Technology Corp.

Sidescan sonar image of the shipwreck YMS-159 (VT-100) in Bedwell Bay
(Image from an Imagenex YellowFin 540kHz Sidescan Sonar)



Source: Jacques Marc, UASBC

Bedwell Bay Wreck YMS-159 — Diver Kent Anders On Foredeck



Source: Jacques Marc, UASBC

Bedwell Bay Wreck YMS-159 — Diver Terry Eldridge In Companionway



Source: Jacques Marc, UASBC

Bedwell Bay Wreck YMS-159 — Bow Gun Mount