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## Monitor Sanctuary head leads Graveyard of the Atlantic expedition

By [Mark St. John Erickson](#)

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Investigators from the Newport News-based Monitor National Marine Sanctuary are playing a leading role in a three-week research expedition designed to study the wrecks of ships sunk off North Carolina in 1942 during the Battle of the Atlantic.

Using advanced remote sensing technologies aboard the NOAA Research Vessel Nancy Foster, the expedition — which began Tuesday — will first attempt to locate and take high-definition photographs of several previously undiscovered World War II shipwrecks in an area known as the "Graveyard of the Atlantic."

During the second phase of the mission, divers from NOAA and its research partners will survey and photograph visible sections of the British armed trawler HMT Bedfordshire, which sank with the loss of its entire crew after being torpedoed by the German submarine U-558 on May 12, 1942.

"The information collected during this expedition will help us better understand and document this often lost chapter of America's maritime history and its significance to the nation," said Monitor sanctuary superintendent David W. Alberg, who is leading the expedition.

"It continues the work conducted by NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries last summer to research and document historically significant shipwrecks tragically lost during World War II."

Alberg said that documenting the condition of these vessels some 67 years after they were lost represents a crucial first step in establishing efforts to preserve these historic sites.

He described the wrecks, which took place in the first year after the devastating Japanese air attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, as "time capsules from one of the darkest times in the nation's history."

Many of the WWII wrecks lying off North Carolina — some in waters as shallow as 130 feet — have become popular recreational dive sites and are visited by thousands of divers annually, he added.

But some of these wrecks have been severely affected by human activity in recent years, leading NOAA — which is the parent agency of the Monitor Sanctuary — to begin developing ways to both preserve public access to the historic underwater sites and encourage their preservation.

In consultation with the British and German governments, which regard the wrecks of their vessels as war graves, NOAA is conducting the survey with technical expertise and logistical support from the Minerals Management Service, the National Park Service, the State of North Carolina and East Carolina University.

Additional support is being provided by the University of North Carolina Coastal Studies Institute, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, the Georgia Aquarium and The Mariners' Museum.

The investigators will employ sophisticated sidescan and multibeam sonar systems as well as an advanced remotely operated vehicle during the operation, Alberg said. They'll also conduct a survey of the marine life found at the shipwreck of the Bedfordshire, documenting its transformation into a flourishing artificial reef.

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