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MMS Ensures Nation's Historic Shipwrecks are Protected as Archaeologists Share in U-Boat Discovery

A highly sought-after World War II German submarine, the U-166, was recently discovered 45 miles from the mouth of the Mississippi River through the joint efforts of the Minerals Management Service and BP and Shell Oil companies. The U-166, the only German submarine sunk in the Gulf of Mexico, rests in the crater it created when it was sent to the bottom by a depth charge in the summer of 1942, shortly after the U-166 torpedoed and sank the passenger freighter *S.S. Robert E. Lee*. The wreckage of the submarine was found in 5,000 feet of water. The U-boat's whereabouts had long been disputed and it was thought to lie far from its actual resting-place, said MMS officials. MMS archaeologists were part of the scientific team that was instrumental in locating and identifying the WWII U-boat. The news of the discovery solved a 59-year old mystery and ended decades of fruitless searching.

"Finding this long-lost submarine was an extraordinary event," said MMS Acting Director Tom Kitsos. "MMS requires the oil industry to file detailed plans for pipelines and platforms before they can construct them," he continued. "Part of these plans involves detailed surveys of the Gulf floor along the construction site. It was in doing this survey that the U-boat was found." Its discovery and confirmation came as a result of an MMS-required shallow-hazard and archaeological survey of the seafloor prior to construction of a proposed gas pipeline by BP and Shell Oil. The gas pipeline survey employed a high-tech, mini-submarine, remote-sensing instrument developed by C&C Technologies, Inc. of Lafayette, La., and had never before been used in the Gulf of Mexico. It is unlikely that this discovery, or many others that have been made in the waters of the Outer Continental Shelf, would have occurred without the regulation and oversight of MMS. As a result of this important discovery, BP and Shell have re-routed their proposed pipeline around the site, a standard means of preserving historic sites from harm during construction.

The MMS considers the effect of all its actions, including lease sales, studies and permits, on the cultural heritage of the United States. To meet this responsibility, it requires the oil and gas industry to conduct marine remote-sensing surveys that may identify shipwrecks. The MMS has staff archaeologists trained to review the geophysical reports submitted by the oil and gas industry. As a result, when BP and Shell first realized the significance of what they had discovered, their first report was made to MMS for direction on how to proceed. Two weeks later, MMS archaeologists accompanied BP and Shell personnel and their own contract archaeologists from C&C Technologies on a research mission for the first glimpse of the U-boat by using a camera aboard a remotely operated vehicle.

Historic preservation is just one of many MMS responsibilities in protecting our offshore environment. "MMS requires industry to conduct the surveys and analyze the data that will tell us where these sensitive sites may be on the seafloor," said Gulf of Mexico Regional Director Chris Oynes. "In this particular instance, Shell and BP were only required by our regulations to investigate the narrow corridor that would be directly affected by their project, which is well clear of both vessels. It is only because of their commitment to go above and beyond the basic requirements that we could solve this 59-

year old mystery and ensure the protection of these vessels. Taken together, these ships are a powerful monument to the memory of the sacrifices made by both sides during the Second World War."

The MMS reviews nearly 1,700 planned wells and pipelines every year for their potential effect on archaeological sites on the outer continental shelf. Because of this regulatory requirement, more than 100 shipwrecks have been discovered on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico. While many of the wrecks are either local fishing or shrimp boats, crewboats, and other modern vessels, over a dozen World War II casualties of the six U-boats known to have patrolled the Gulf have been found. Older shipwrecks have also been identified and studied, including the passenger steamer *New York*, sunk in 1846, and the Civil War Union gunboat *USS Hatteras*. Just last year, the MMS listed the well-preserved side-wheel steamer *Josephine* to the National Register of Historic Places, an official list maintained by the Federal government of the nation's most important historical sites.

For more MMS archaeological information, visit the website at <http://www.gomr.mms.gov/homepg/regulate/environ/archaeological/introduction.html>.

MMS is the federal agency in the U.S. Department of the Interior that manages the nation's oil, natural gas and other mineral resources on the outer continental shelf in federal offshore waters. The agency also collects, accounts for and [disburses mineral revenues](#) from federal and Indian leases. These collections totaled more than \$8 billion last year and more than \$110 billion since the agency was created in 1982. Annually, nearly \$1 billion from those revenues go into the Land and Water Conservation Fund for the acquisition and development of state and federal park and recreation lands.

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