Robert Sténuit
Fulfilling a quest for treasure turned a salver into an archeologist.

ILLUSTRATION: LINDA HESLOP

SALVOR, ARCHEOLOGIST

Robert Sténuit

By Sean Holland

PHOTO: MARC JASINSKI

Belgium's virgin territory
Improvised gear and training allowed Robert Sténuit and Marc Jasinski to explore sumps in their native Belgium.

Robert Sténuit was well on his way to becoming a lawyer when he stumbled upon Harry Rieseberg's *600 Milliards Sous les Mers*. The fictional account of diving for treasure so captured the fancy of the then 20-year-old student that he abandoned his studies at the Universite Libre in Brussels to pursue a diving career.

More than 10,000 underwater hours after leaving the university, Robert has yet to regret his decision. Asked to name his favorite dive, the 65-year-old treasure salvor and underwater archeologist says coyly, "The next one, of course." The man who helped pioneer deep-diving mixed-gas tables in the U.S. Man in the Sea program and advanced knowledge of science and history with record-breaking dives is unimpressed with many of today's diving trends.

"Today's divers look like Christmas trees with their buoyancy compensators, octopus regulators and buzzing instruments. Change is not always progress. The aqualung hasn't significantly changed in the last 30 years, except now you can choose the color of the tanks and your fins are fluorescent. Only the price has changed. I do not dive with a BC, yet here I am. I use only one regulator and, yes, I have only one steering wheel in my car."

Those who wanted to dive invented their own gear when Robert began exploring caves and sumps in Han sur Lesse in the Ardennes region of his native Belgium in 1952, a year before he found Rieseberg's book. "Time and again, you would find your gallery ending in the water. The only way to continue was to dive." To push beyond these dead ends, Robert and his buddies borrowed wetsuits and crafted homemade gear. No training was available then, so they learned the challenges of exploring overhead environments as they went along. Somehow they survived the foolhardy risks and lived to tell of newfound passages. "The walls were completely white — like vir-

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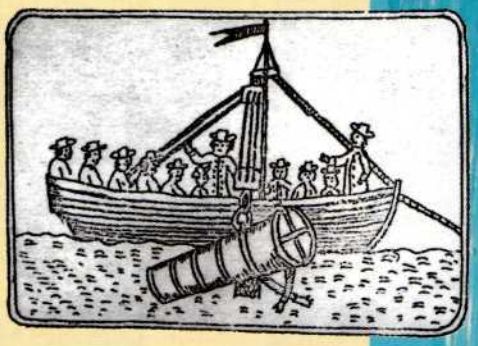
Recovering Diving History

John Lethbridge



In the years following the sinking of the *Slot ter Hooge*. Lethbridge made successful salvage efforts working in his "diving barrel." In this illustration he is being lowered at the site.

Not all research takes place in dusty library stacks. A fascination with diving history has led Robert to build and dive working replica's of historical diving gear such as John Lethbridge's "diving barrel."

"I'm a very keen diver with a passion for history. Some golfers like to collect old clubs and balls. Building this seemed like the obvious thing to do," says Robert. The wooden cylinder allowed dives to 60 feet / 18 meters for 34 minutes before it was pulled to the surface. It was fitted with a glass porthole; two armholes with leather cuffs allowed Lethbridge to gather the treasure.

On another occasion, he rebuilt and dived with the only remaining original demand regulator aqualung, invented in the 1860s in France by Benoît Rouquayrol and Auguste Denayrouze. The first users of the "Réservoir-Régulateur" wore no mask. Other such apparatuses in the late 1860s, featured a larger air tank and no surface-supply hose. Their pressure was limited to 30 or 40 bars / 441 or 558 pounds per square inch. These were in fact the first scubas. Over 5,000 such units were built and sold from 1867 to well after World War I and used primarily by navies and public wreck divers. ■

Robert takes a dip in his replica of the "diving machine" John Lethbridge invented in the early 1700s and used to salvage silver from the wreck of the *Slot ter Hooge*.

After rebuilding an original 1867 Rouquayrol-Denayrouze aqualung, Robert goes for a test dive. The first users wore no mask.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROBERT STÉNUIT

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gin white marble. I felt proud to be an explorer in my native Belgium. Belgium is such a small and crowded country that to discover virgin territory in Belgium is quite a feat."

Robert continues to cave dive, but it's taken a back seat to the allure of the open sea since he found Riesberg's book in a small shop in the Galerie de la Reine in Brussels. "I knew it was total nonsense and didn't believe a word but it hooked me. I should have waited two more years to finish my degree. But then, I thought I was wasting my time since someone else might get to 'my wrecks.' It was a silly thing." Robert's parents were displeased. "My father dutifully warned me of the pitfalls and tried to persuade me out of it. But like any good father, he said, 'If this is what you really want to do, how can I help?'"

Armed with youthful optimism, an ancient magnometer and a reluctant blessing from his parents, Robert set out on his first treasure hunt in summer 1953 in Vigo Bay in northwest Spain. On June 12, 1702, a formation of English and Dutch warships attacked a Spanish fleet laden with New World treasure. So many Spanish vessels sank that finding treasure seemed like a sure bet to Robert. But, he says, "we dragged the magnometer underwater and found only modern wrecks." The iron wire telegraphic cable to Portugal was another "wreck" he found that summer. "Often I would dive in pitch-black water, occasionally down to 280 feet [85 meters], on air, of course, to investigate something only to find the cable."

Vigo Bay did not yield so much as a single doubloon, but a chance meeting with a visiting American, Edwin A. Link, furthered his quest for treasure. The inventor of the Link Trainer, the flight simulator that was used to train pilots during World War II, Link became an underwater explorer and treasure hunter who was the driving force behind the Man in the Sea project (*Immersed*, Winter 1996). Man in the Sea aimed to demonstrate the feasibility of saturation diving. Now a common practice, the ability of a diver to stay and work at depth until tissues are fully saturated with nitrogen was just a theory then. Robert left the French commercial diving firm SOGETRAM to became the chief diver for Ed's Man in the Sea program.

"The treasure hunter spends his own money or the money of his private backers instead of the money of the taxpayers. This is the only practical way to tell them apart."

And in 1962, Robert completed the world's first saturation dive at sea, spending 25 hours in a Link cylinder habitat at 200 feet / 62 meters breathing a helium-oxygen mix off Villefranche-sur-Mer, France. "We showed that man can actually live and work in the sea," says Robert. The success of the project led to support from the U.S. Navy. "It wanted the capability of working in deep water in a military context as well as rescuing lost subs."

Robert and Ed were partners in more than advancing hyperbaric science. A lust for treasure forged another bond between the two men. In 1963, they set out to find a legendary treasure of World War II: six iron ammunition boxes filled with gold and jewels "gathered" in North Africa by Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler's special troops. Incorrectly named Rommel's treasure (after Field Marshall Erwin Rommel), the boxes were reportedly sunk off Corsica at the war's end. Despite Ed's vast array of electronic detection equipment, treasure again eluded Robert.

Ocean Systems Inc.'s purchase of the Man in the Sea program in 1965 brought an end to the team. Ed left the project, but Robert stayed on as a researcher, diving in habitats and chambers to develop oxygen-helium decompression and saturation tables for extreme depth, while dreaming of treasure. In 1966, he convinced Ocean Systems that it needed an office in London, where he ended each workday by heading straight to the British Museum. There he researched the *Girona*, part of Spain's seemingly invincible, 130-ship armada that sailed on July 22, 1588, to attack England, (*Immersed*, Fall 1996). The *Girona* was a galleass, a small maneuverable oar-driven warship, that had gathered survivors, treasure and supplies from four other Spanish vessels that were either sunk by the English or went down in deadly gales off Ireland. On Oct. 26, 1588, the *Girona* met her demise in a fierce storm off Giant's Causeway on northern Ireland's rocky coast. Only five of the 130 men aboard survived. "I concentrated on the *Girona* because she contained all that was valuable from five different ships," says Robert.

Some 600 hours of research finally paid off on June 27, 1967, when Robert, joined by fellow Belgian Marc Jasinski, slipped into a small cove called Port na Spaniagh ("Port of the Spaniards") by the local Irish. Despite the promising name, serious historians placed the *Girona* wreck site miles away. They were wrong. Amid boulders below 30 feet / 10 meters of icy, turbulent water were cannonballs, brass guns, silver coins and even links of a gold chain. After 15 years of searching Robert finally found his treasure and discovered the first Armada shipwreck, too. "It felt great!" he says. "I asked Ocean Systems for a six-month leave of absence, and I'm still on it."

The pair could have made a fortune selling their finds to the highest bidder, but the experience raised Robert's awareness of the value of preserving artifacts for the historical value. "It was unique and special. It didn't make sense to spread it all over the world," says Robert. "If it is in private hands, where will it be after the person dies? Sold off without its background or history or thrown away? One can become rich in many ways, but archeology is all about having fun, intellectual fun." Instead, the treasure was made available to the Ulster Museum in Belfast and became one of the jewels in its collection.

A backer of the *Girona* project, Henri DeLauze, a member of the National Geo-

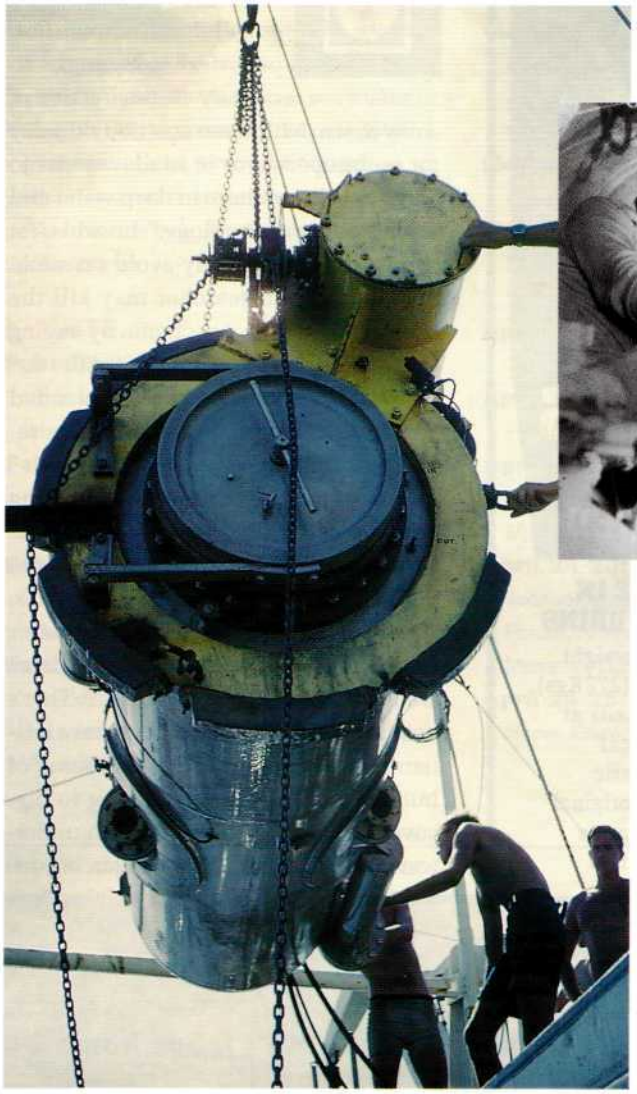
graphic Society and a founder of the French deep diving and engineering firm Compagne Maritimes d'Expertises , recalled Robert as "a satellite for my dreams. I was extremely busy with COMEX, which I had started a few years earlier, working 15-hour days. I work with a lot

The first saturation dive, a dramatic record in 1962, involved 25 hours cramped in a habitat at 200 feet / 62 meters. It showed that men could actually live and work in the sea.

of scientists, researchers and archeologists, but no one has the talent of Robert. And he is an honest guy. That's rare in this kind of business. We found a lot of things but never had a great coup. But we had fun anyway."

The *Girona* legitimized Robert's lifelong goal of finding treasure and marked his metamorphosis from youthful adventurer to mature marine archeologist. In 1968, he formed the Groupe de Recherche Archéologique Sous-Marin Post-Médiévale, or Group for Underwater Post-Medieval Archaeological Research. GRASP, as the privately funded organization came to be known, studies wrecks lost during Europe's overseas expansion between the 16th and 19th centuries. It has excavated 15 vessels, ranging from the *Wendela,* a Danish frigate that sank near Scotland's Shetland Islands in 1737, to the *Mei Kong,* a French steamer carrying 12th- and 13th-century Cham sculptures that was lost off Somalia in 1877. GRASP's discoveries have been documented in 15 books and numerous academic papers, articles and television documentaries.

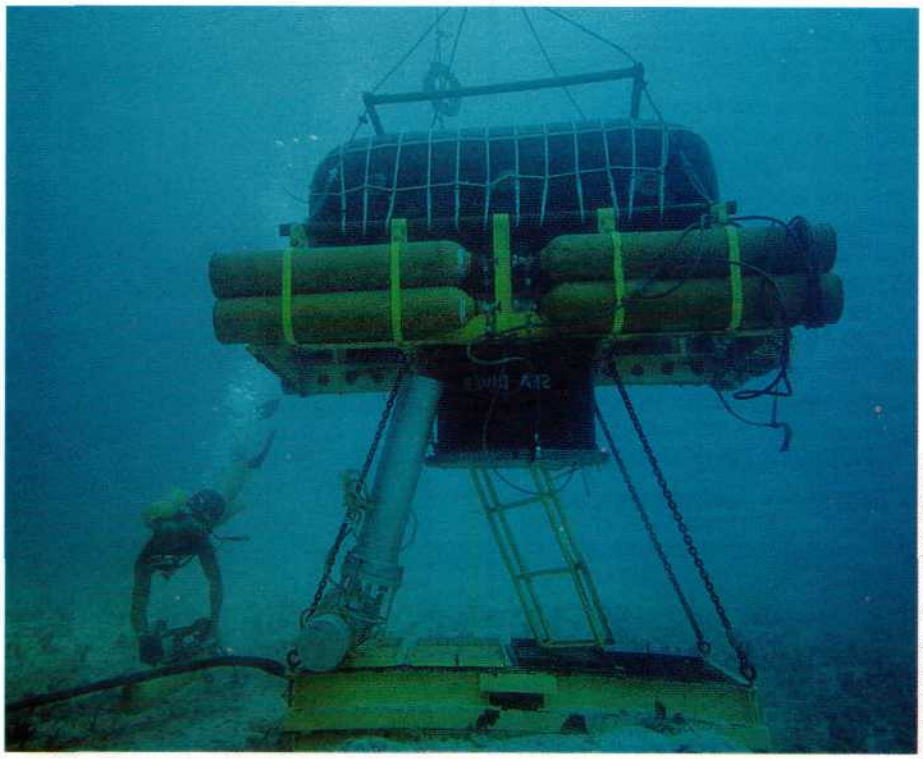
Robert strongly advises treasure hunters to do their homework before starting their expeditions. "More expeditions have been made looking for treasure or ships that never existed than for real ones," he says. A little research can save



Man in the Sea program

As chief diver for in the Man in the Sea program, Robert completed the world's first saturation dive at sea. Pictured left is the Link cylinder being lowered for the dive with Robert, above, cramped inside.

Below: A submerged portable inflatable dwelling that added comfort to later saturation diving experiments undergoes shallow water tests in Ed Link's Man in the Sea project.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROBERT STÉNUIT

a lot of expedition costs. "A day in the library costs a fraction of a day at sea, which can cost $5,000 a day for scuba operations in shallow water to $50,000 a day or more in deep water and with modern technology," he adds.Yet some salvors purposely avoid research. "Sometimes a researcher may kill the promoter's dream or scheme by saying that a treasure was never aboard the targeted ship, that it had been unloaded and transferred or that it had been recovered already."

Research is one of Robert's strong points, according to Marc, a buddy on the *Girona* who went on to found the Centre de Recherches Archéologiques Fluviales, southern Belgium's only underwater archeology organization. "So many divers are tough guys with small brains. That's not the case with Robert. Robert has a brilliant mind. And he's got a great sense of humor, too. It's always exciting to discover things with him. It's tough underwater work with a bit of danger, but intellectually it's extremely satisfying."

A map copied from a silver tankard helped Robert pin point the location of the elusive *Slot ter Hooge,* a Dutch East Indiaman that sank near Portugal's Madeira Islands. The tankard belonged to John Lethbridge, an 18th-century diver from Devon, England, who actually salvaged most of the *Slot ter Hooge's* gold, silver bars and coins. The ship sank in 1724 during a fierce storm with a loss of 221 sailors and passengers. Robert became fascinated with Lethbridge's "diving barrel" and, with Henri's help, he built a working replica of the 1715 diving gear (see Recovering Diving History on page 11).

Between history and salvaging, Robert often is besieged by two camps — archeologists and treasure hunters. "Academics are making it very difficult for today's salvors," he says. "They are trying to outlaw them through new UNESCO legislation (see Wreck Diving, page 30). Is it that they are concerned about their jobs?" he asks. "Treasure hunters have more of a spirit of enterprise, they are often better funded, more competent, do more research and have more advanced equipment. The academics look down on the treasure hunters because their goal is profit through the sale of recovered artifacts. The treasure hunters note that the academic's goal is profit too, profit from the papers and communications that are vital for their status and job security," he points out. "The treasure hunter spends his own money or the money of his private backers instead of the money of the taxpayers. This is the only practical way to tell them apart," he adds.

Robert's daughters, Marie-Eve and Ondine, share his love of history. Both are pursuing archeological studies, albeit on land rather than at sea. "They are both good divers," says Robert. "Marie-Eve worked on several of my expeditions, doing archeological drawings and repairing broken pots until she decided to study Histoire de l'Art et Archeologie at the Université Libre. So now we also have a card-carrying academic in the family, and the younger one has started on that track too." ■

Sean J. Holland is a member of the British Society of Underwater Photographers.