

A search for our past

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By Hank Nuwer

The ship was in trouble. Its single-brailed sail dipped dangerously parallel to the surging froth below, as a panicked crew struggled to hold the deck. All sensed the destruction just moments away. Ever closer loomed the jagged rocks of the lee shore. Only time for a prayer remained before the final catastrophe struck.

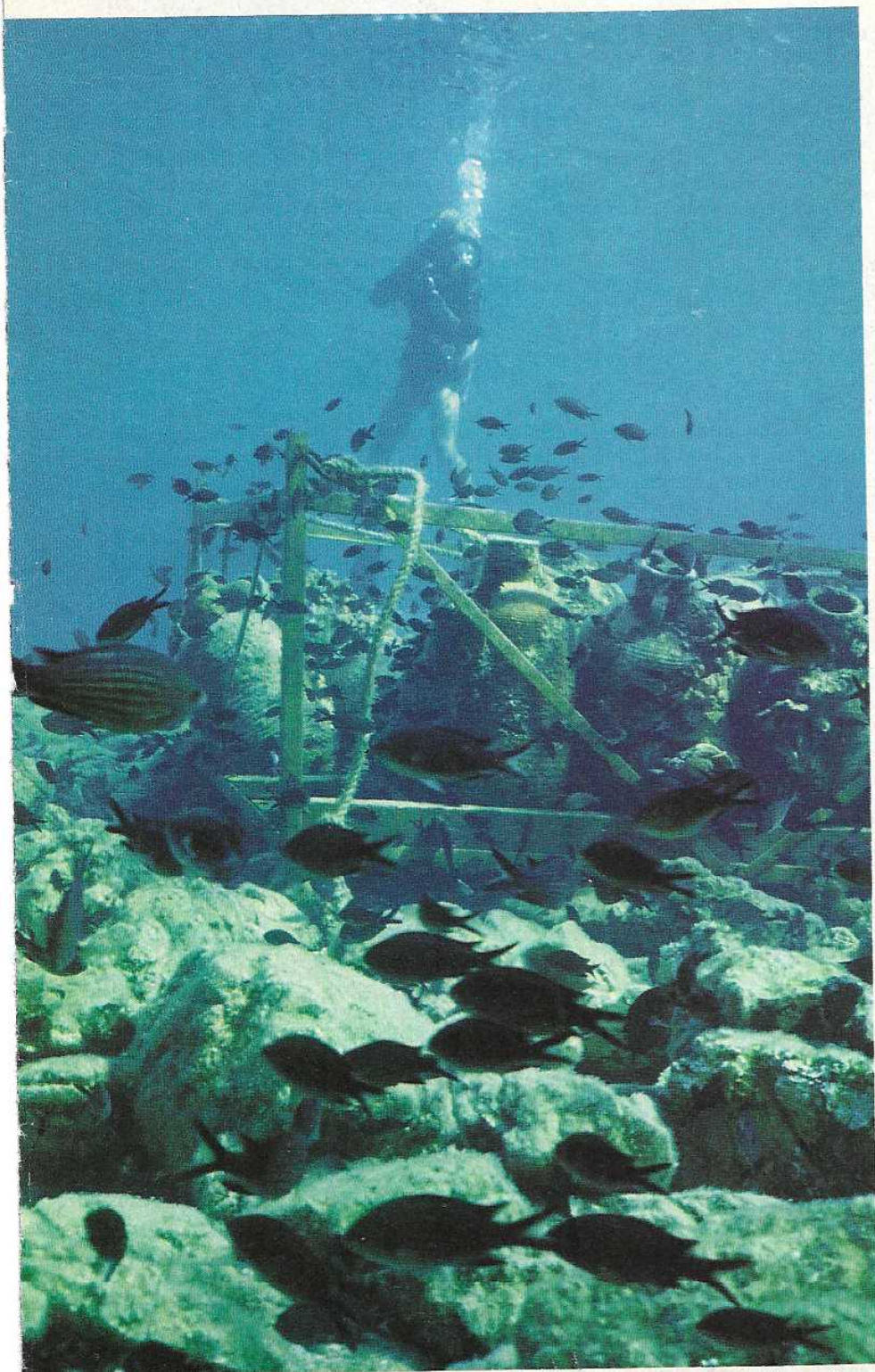
Afterwards, Nature attempted to cover up the evidence of her passion. Sand and mud slowly settled upon the remains, and shipworms ate ravenously of the hull. There the story of this ship, and thousands more like it, that foundered centuries ago would end except for the work of three men.

George Bass, Richard Steffy and Fred van Doorninck do not look like heroes. Bass's once well-knit frame has softened, and his hair has worn thin on top. Steffy's hair has retained its crow-feather luster, but his face resembles a contour map with deep lines running in every direction. Van Doorninck is spare and gray; he looks every inch the career professor. The youngest member of the trio is 45, and all are devoted family members. Yet because these nautical archaeologists have braved the terrors of the deep and confronted the opposition of their peers, long-hidden secrets of our past are being revealed.

The three men are founders of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology ironically located on the plains of East Texas at Texas A & M University's Research and Extension Center in Bryan. The organization is currently excavating for buried ships whose remains cover a span of 3,300 years along four continents. Texas A & M serves as a training ground for future nautical archaeologists who earn masters degrees while working in the field.

The president of the organization is George Bass, who does not doubt that he was destined to become a seeker of nautical relics. "I honestly believe that I was fated to end up in

continued



Chuck Nicklin

A diver takes careful inventory of amphoras before they are raised to the surface. Later, only drawings and photos will remain to show layout of original site.