

USS Independence: Underwater expedition off California finds sunken World War II-era warship

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San Francisco: Explorers have spotted a sunken World War II-era aircraft carrier, once used in atomic tests in the Pacific, along the California coast in an underwater expedition.

The expedition led by famed oceanographer Robert Ballard captured on Tuesday the wreckage of the USS Independence, located half a mile under the sea in the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary.

The ship had not been seen since it was scuttled about 30 miles off San Francisco in 1951. USS Independence was a fearsome aircraft carrier and famously sank a Japanese battleship during the fight for the Philippines during World War-II.

Bow of USS Independence, seen for the first time after 65 years.

Scientists aboard the ocean research ship Nautilus lowered two unmanned submersibles to the ocean floor to find a Hellcat fighter plane, anti-aircraft guns, hatches and the ship's name on the hull.

"What's so wonderful about the wrecks in deeper water, like this ship, the Titanic and the Bismarck, is that they are in amazing states of preservation," Ballard said. "There's very little change from when the Navy scuttled it" in 1951.

View of 22mm anti-aircraft deck gun covered by a large glass sponge.

"The deep sea is the largest museum on Earth."

The ship was found at the depth of 2,600 feet and was remarkably intact. The scientists have found all sorts of marine life which have turned the ship into their artificial home.

Grumman Hellcat fighter aircraft seen in aircraft elevator hatch, with five-point star and stripe marking still visible in top-left corner.

Nautilus will conduct the first visual survey of Independence since her sinking as well as image the ship for photomosaic and microbathymetry data.

Samples of marine life growing on the ship will be brought onboard to be tested for possible radioactivity remaining from the bomb tests, as well as to be analyzed for the effects of climate change.

USS Independence on anchor near San Francisco after being towed from Bikini Atoll.

â€œThese USS Independence dives are part of an expedition to explore the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary with our partners at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Recently expanded to protect 3,295 square miles, Greater Farallones NMS contains over 400 shipwrecks, unique deep water coral habitats, and is largely unexplored in the deepest portions,â€• Nautilus team says on its website.

USS Independence underway with aircraft on deck--this was the first dedicated U.S. aircraft carrier to conduct night flight operations in World War II.

Scientists plan to explore the wreckage of a historic steam yacht from 1886 and the freighter Dorothy Windermote as part of the four-month expedition.

Earlier this month, the Nautilus team discovered a "googly eyed" stubby squid while combing the sea floor off the California coast. Video of the researchers delighting in the discovery became an Internet sensation.

USS Independence in operation

To watch round-the-clock video of the expedition, visit www.nautiluslive.org.

- (With inputs from AP)