

Ronni Gilligan...PIONEER DIVER

by Bill Bleyer

Ronni Gilligan considers her last dive on the ocean liner *Empress of Ireland* a success, even though she spent most of it upside down and almost developed hypothermia.

Gilligan, a Long Beach resident, returned two years ago to the wreck that she had first helped explore in the late 1960s.

But her dive in the frigid waters of Canada's Gulf of St. Lawrence ended after only 15 minutes when she became inverted after the air inside her drysuit migrated to her feet and both she and her buddy could not right her.

Gilligan, a pioneering diver recognized last year by being inducted into the Women Divers Hall of Fame, isn't complaining, however. "I was really happy with my dive because I did it and I got to the *Empress*," she said. "I did not panic when the stuff happened" — even when she concluded for a few seconds that she would not survive the dive.

Few divers would opt to make one of North America's most difficult wreck dives at age 62, but Gilligan was intent on fulfilling a dream.

In 1968, she had become the first woman to

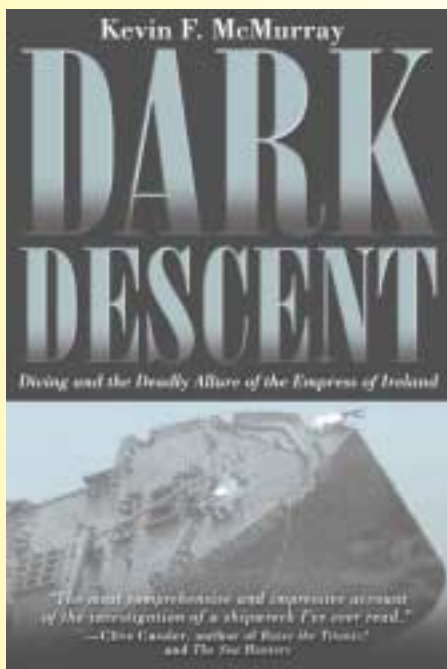
wreck divers," said McMurray, a Westchester resident who grew up in Rockaway Beach, Queens. "It's so historical and it's a very challenging dive. Ronni was not only the first woman to dive the wreck back in 1968 when diving was really in its embryonic stage, but she was also part of the team that made the first penetration deep inside the ship, so she's done some cutting-edge stuff."

The eight-year-old *Empress of Ireland*, owned by Canadian Pacific Railway, was on its way from Québec City to Liverpool — its regular route — when it collided with the *Storstad*, a Norwegian coal-carrying vessel with an ice-breaking bow in the early hours of May 29, 1914. It had 10 watertight bulkheads that theoretically made it unsinkable, but they had to be manually closed and that proved impossible after the *Storstad's* sharp bow pierced the side of the liner, which began to list immediately.

While the 548-foot *Empress* had 56 lifeboats — enough for all onboard to meet the new regulations established after *Titanic* sank two years earlier with more than 1,500 casualties — most could not be launched because of the angle of the ship. In a strange coincidence, coal stoker William Clarke was working on both ships the nights they sank.



Ronni Gilligan and Peter Perrault celebrating another successful dive, 1970.



dive on the wreck and the first to enter its gloomy interior littered with the bones of some of the 1,012 of the 1,477 aboard who died when the ship sank in only 14 minutes after a collision in 1914.

When the offer came to revisit the site, "My first reaction was 'no. I'd be crazy,'" she said. "I hadn't been diving like that in at least ten years. And then it was like 'well, I would like to see it one more time'."

The person who made her the offer to return was Kevin F. McMurray, an experienced wreck diver and author of *Dark Descent — Diving and the Deadly Allure of the Empress of Ireland*, which was published in May.

In satisfying his own longtime curiosity about the wreck, he learned about the exploits of Veronica "Ronni" Gilligan, interviewed her and then invited her to join a trip back to the *Empress* in 2002, which is recounted in the book as well as in a short documentary, "Return to the *Empress*," made by McMurray and diveboat Captain Dan Crowell.

"She's a pioneer of diving on the *Empress of Ireland*, which is considered a pinnacle dive for



Ronni Gilligan stretched out and waiting to go, 2003

The *Storstad* survived the collision only to be sunk by a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland on March 8, 1917.

"It's one of the worst disasters in North American history," McMurray said. But few people outside the dive community have heard of the *Empress*. He cites five reasons: "First of all, it wasn't a very glamorous route. It was Québec City to Liverpool; it wasn't New York to Southampton like the *Titanic*. Also there weren't a lot of celebrities on board like there were on the *Titanic*. Three, it wasn't its maiden voyage; the ship had made 95 crossings of the Atlantic. It also happened three months before the outbreak of World War I, so it

was going against some pretty big world events. The fifth and most important reason was the ship sank in just 14 minutes at 2 o'clock in the morning on its first night out and people weren't familiar with the ship and there were no lifeboat drills scheduled until the next day; *Titanic* took two and a half hours to sink and there was a lot of time for drama, cowardice and bravery that was well-recorded. If you didn't get out of the interior of the ship within five minutes, you were doomed."

What makes the *Empress* such a challenging dive is that it sits in 140 feet of water that is bitterly cold year-round and there are roaring currents coming in and out of the St. Lawrence River. The conditions are so tough that one of the commercial divers hired by Canadian Pacific to recover bodies a month after the sinking died, as have five sport divers between 1981 and 2002.

"One of the things that made it difficult was that there were wires hanging all over the place," Gilligan said. Several times she had to go inside the wreck to untangle her buddy from those wires. The cold water is a constant concern. "The warmest we've had on the wreck in August is 36 degrees, which is quite cold, even in a drysuit," McMurray said. A drysuit has neck and wrist seals to keep out the water so thermal underwear can be worn under it. Gilligan and her team that made hundreds of dives to the *Empress* between 1968 and 1970 wore neoprene wetsuits that allows the cold water in where the body tries to heat it up to provide an insulating layer.

"It was very, very cold," Gilligan recalled. "It was always in the 30's. Visibility was generally five to 12 feet." Gilligan, who lives a half block from the ocean in Long Beach in a house where she spent her childhood during the summers, was never much bothered by cold water.

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"When I first moved up to Syracuse to work
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with blind people as a rehabilitation specialist, I was volunteering at a community center teaching senior lifesaving. The Red Cross came in and offered free scuba lessons to the staff. I took the lessons because I love to do anything with the ocean and then joined a scuba club, Syracuse Scuba Society. It was really kind of strange that I grew up a half a block from the ocean and go all the way to Syracuse to learn to dive. I still haven't been diving along the coast here. It was a very active club; we dove just about every weekend.

"I remember my first dive," she said. "It was off Marblehead, Massachusetts. I didn't have gloves and I didn't have boots, and it was freezing. At the time, in '63, I was the only female around who was diving. But I figured the guys must be just as cold, so I kept going."

She tried wreck diving in the St. Lawrence River. And by the time the invitation to dive the *Empress* came, she had hundreds of dives under her belt, including many cold-water wreck dives.

The invitation came because

recreational divers in Canada were determined to rediscover the wreck after reading about the 50th anniversary of the sinking in 1964. The effort was headed by André Ménard, whose team found and dove on the wreck that year. He recruited Gilligan and her friends to explore the interior of the wreck in 1968 because they had better equipment and skills than the Canadian divers.

Her regular dive buddy, Peter Perrault, a dive instructor and president of the Syracuse Scuba Society, called her, Gilligan said, and asked: "What would you think of diving a virgin ocean liner wreck?"



Ronni, circa 1968.

"André asked Pete if he knew other divers and Pete said, 'The best diver I know happens to be female. Does that bother you?'" André said that would be fine as long as Pete was the one that dived with me." So the team was comprised of three Americans and two Canadians.

"We all thought we'd be rich," Gilligan said. They didn't find a lot of valuables from the monetary point of view—they recovered the captain's safe and found only tickets and an old magazine. But they did find a lot of

value historically in terms of artifacts. Gilligan has the shipyard builder's plaque on her wall and a pile of china.

But first they had to locate the hulk. "It took us almost four days to find the wreck," Gilligan said.

Then she made the 80-foot descent to the side of the ship. "I saw the boat coming up at me and it was filled with these white ghostlike tulip things," Gilligan said. While she was suffering from nitrogen narcosis because of the depth, the tulip things turned out to be real: truncates or sea potatoes growing on the hull.

"As soon as I hit the bottom, I was fine," she said. Her dive buddy had too much weight on his belt so they immediately aborted the dive. "But we had seen it."

On the next dives, "we would swim and check out the outside," she said. "Then we started penetrating the ship. We were in the dining areas and pulling up plates and wine bottles. I was always very cognizant of the fact that it was holy ground. It was not scary but kind of eerie. I found a button-up leather boot and I thought 'where is the lady who was wearing this; did she get off or is she floating around?' I also saw leg bones but no skulls; I don't know how I would've reacted to skulls. I said a prayer for the people and kept my mind on what I was supposed to be doing."

Over the three summers, Gilligan said, "The ultimate dive for me was the end of the first year when we took the stern mooring off and the current carried us like a fly over the entire length of the boat and the visibility that day was perfect. Up until then, we'd only seen small sections. That was super."

Gilligan stopped visiting the *Empress* after three years because more and more people were

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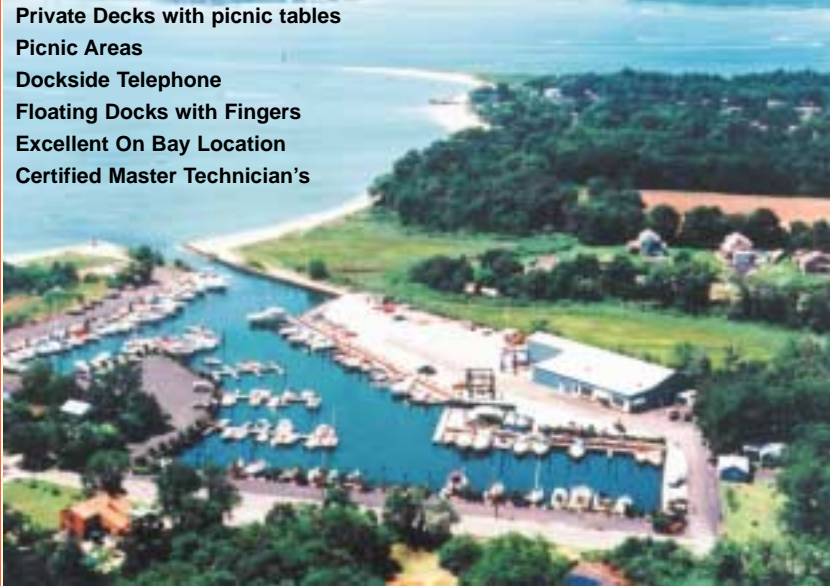
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coming to dive on it with what she considered insufficient training "and I knew it was a difficult wreck and didn't want to be part of any accident or tragedy." So, she stayed away until McMurray called 32 years later.

"I was really happy in my wet-suit," she said, and she didn't want to be confined and hot in a drysuit. But the dive expedition organizers insisted she would be safer if she learned to use a drysuit. She agreed to do some drysuit training dives in the Thousand Islands and decided after two that she was ready.

"We would've liked to have her done some more training," McMurray said, "but Ronni felt she only had so many dives left in her because she was 62 and she hadn't done that kind of diving in a long time. So she felt she wanted to save it for the *Empress*." Gilligan said she was able to use the suit without problems after two dives and wanted to get back to the *Empress*.

After about 15 minutes on the wreck, "I got air in my feet and couldn't right myself," she said. "I was hanging onto the *Empress* for dear life. For a few seconds, I

thought 'this could be the end.' Then I said 'Stupid, you're outside the wreck, your buddy is here and you have lots of air, so just hang on.' My buddy cut holes in my suit so the air would come out, so I got myself righted and we came back up."

She realized later that she had not been given ankle weights to keep her feet down, which makes it difficult to dive properly in a drysuit.

Gilligan still wanted to do more dives, but the rest of the team figured she had had a close call and did not let her back in the water again.

In the interval between her visits, she said, "The ship had deteriorated some. The railing was crumbling where before it was intact."

Gilligan said what she saw two years ago has left her intrigued and wanting to see more.

So is she planning to return again to the *Empress*?

"It's a possibility," she said. "With the right equipment and buddies, I think I can do it successfully."



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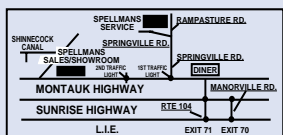
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