



SeaHistory

FOR KIDS

Where big ships go to die



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After two decades of straining and twisting their steel hulls through salty oceans, the world's large ships become increasingly difficult to maintain and even harder to insure. Those gigantic cargo vessels, massive oil tankers and majestic cruise liners—like the former Princess Lines' 'Love Boat'—have a working life of 20 to 25 years. New regulations directed at the world's fleet of large oil tankers will make thousands of them obsolete in the next few years.

What happens to these hulking vessels after they have outlived their potential?

Some are converted into floating warehouses or grain-storage bins. Maritime museums might restore a few of the ships that possess historic significance. But what about all the rest of these floating mountains of steel, copper and other valuable metals?

The majority of these gargantuan craft are driven "Full speed ahead!" up upon beaches in Bangladesh and India.

Stuck fast in the tidal mud, they are attacked by hundreds of barefoot "breakers" who virtually devour a ship like ants at a picnic—cutting it apart into manageable pieces and dragging the scrap steel away.

This is dangerous work with few rewards. Cutting torches occasionally touch off explosions of trapped, toxic gas. Ten-ton walls of scrap steel, peeled from a tanker's side, can crush unwary workers. The hours are long and the pay is low (\$2 to \$4 per day) but these men can reduce a 1000-foot tanker to nothing in a matter of weeks.

In recent years as many as 700 ships per year have been disposed of in this crude, but effective, way. But, within the next decade, more than 2000 "end-of-life" ships will be taken out of service every year. They will be run up on the beach in Asia—chopped up and dragged away—to be recycled as new cars, shiny new bicycles or, yes, even brand new ships.



Grissom's capsule, after recovery and extensive cleaning. Courtesy of the Kansas Cosmosphere, Hutchinson KS

A Shipwrecked Spacecraft?

One of the US Navy's prevailing mysteries is how a NASA spacecraft came to be sunk and abandoned at the bottom of the ocean only minutes after it made history in space. After orbiting the earth for 15 minutes, Astronaut Gus Grissom's Mercury 4 command module splashed into the Atlantic Ocean on 21 July 1961.

Before Navy rescuers could reach the capsule, bobbing in the waves, the explosive bolts on the emergency hatch detonated and the spacecraft began to fill with water. Grissom, sealed in his spacesuit, quickly climbed out of the hatchway and began to float near the capsule. As his spaceship was sinking Grissom's spacesuit began to fill with water and started to drag him below the surface as well. US Navy rescue divers arrived in time to buoy up the astronaut. Then they attached a cable between the sinking capsule and a rescue copter. But the capsule was waterlogged and it had to be released. It sank to the bottom of the sea.

Ever since that dramatic splashdown, there has been much discussion about how the explosive hatch detonated and caused the capsule to sink. Therefore, in order to save this precious piece of American history, and help solve the mystery, a group of underwater explorers located the historic spaceship, resting upright in the mud, three miles below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean.

The group devised a strategy to bring it to the surface and, in July 1999, they recovered the capsule intact, thirty-eight years after its historic space mission.

The capsule has been cleaned and restored and the spaceship (with its gaping hatchway) is now on display at the Kansas Cosmosphere in Hutchinson, Kansas, for everyone to investigate. However, the mysterious hatch itself has not been found. It keeps its secret, somewhere, 15,000 feet beneath the Atlantic waves.



A corroding *Liberty Bell 7* rests upright on the ocean floor.
Courtesy Kansas Cosmosphere, Hutchinson KS