

U.S.S. Narcissus

A Civil War era ship that sank off Egmont Key

The U.S.S. *Narcissus*, a tug that served in the Union Navy during the Civil War sank in 1866, off Egmont Key (Tampa, Florida), with the loss of all hands. At the time, this was one of the single worst disasters in U.S. naval history.

The U.S.S. Narcissus

Launched in New York, the *Narcissus* was steam powered by an overhead cylinder steam engine driving a single screw propeller. The ship was capable of 14 knots per hour. At 115-tons, the *Narcissus* was 82-feet long, 19-foot beam, and had a draft of 9-feet. She was armed with one 20-pound muzzle loading rifle and a 12-pound smoothbore gun.



Serving the Union

The 82-foot Union tug *Narcissus* participated in the Battle of Mobile Bay, where Admiral David Glasgow Farragut is said to have exclaimed "Damn the torpedoes. Full speed ahead!"

The Fateful Trip

On December 7, 1864, the *Narcissus* struck a torpedo (mine) in Mobile Bay. She sank and was refloated and to Pensacola for repair. On January 1, 1866 (after the war), the *Narcissus* left Pensacola bound for New York for decommissioning and return to civilian service.

On January 3, the *Narcissus* ran aground 1-1/2 miles west of Egmont Key off Tampa Bay during one of the sever winter storms during a cold front moving through the area. When the cold seawater came in contact with the hot steam boiler, she exploded, killing the entire crew of 29.

News of the disaster spread slowly. National newspapers made no mention of the incident until February 3, when the New York Times carried the following account on Page 8:

"Nothing official has been received by the Navy-yard in relation to the United States steamer *Narcissus*, reported to have lost on Egmont Key, Florida. It is stated that the *Narcissus* was wrecked nearly a year ago in Tampa Bay. The United States tug *Jessamine* left Pensacola, Fla. about the same time that the *Narcissus* left, and it is probable that the *Jessamine* is the unfortunate vessel. Nothing definite is, however, known in relation to the matter."

Authorities would later learn that the vessel lost off Egmont Key was indeed the *Narcissus*. Federal troops from nearby Egmont Key salvaged the ship's guns, but no signs of survivors were ever found.

On the Bottom

The remains of the *Narcissus* lay at 27 37.460N, 82 48.050W Graduate students from Texas A&M did some work on the *Narcissus* in 1999, but other than that, little true research has been done on this historic shipwreck. "As far as we are concerned, the fact that it is covered with sand is a good thing," said Della Scott-Ireton, an underwater archaeologist with the state's Bureau of Archaeological Research. "As long as it is covered, it is protected. That is our major concern."

Modern Reports

EGMONT KEY - Chad Carney studied his depth recorder and noticed a slight relief in the bottom contour. "That could be it," he said. "But it looks like it is pretty well covered up."

The wreck of the U.S.S. *Narcissus* is resting 15 feet below the surface a few hundred yards off one of the busiest shipping channels in the United States, has been periodically covered and uncovered by passing storms since it sank on a cold January day nearly 140 years ago.

Mike Barnette, a founding member of the Association of Underwater Explorers, went to the wreck site on a sunny December morning in hopes of diving the 82-foot tugboat. He had hoped the series of summer tropical storms might have uncovered the tug's engine, the wreck's most prominent landmark.

"The last time anybody was on this site was in 1997," he said. "But a couple of years later, it had been completely sanded in."

Carney, an avid spearfisherman and frequent diving partner of Barnette, prides himself on his knowledge of local wrecks. "But I would be willing to say that most people have no idea that this exists right off the Ship's Channel," he said.

As Carney and Barnette circled the rise in the sand that they thought marked the *Narcissus*, a fisherman heading offshore veered off course and came right up to their boat, hoping to get a new fishing spot for their GPS.

"You see what I mean," Carney said. "They have no idea what we are looking for."

In the Fall of 1994, the Florida Bureau of Archeological Research (BAR), an agency within the Division of Historical Resources in the Florida Department of State, began an historical and archeological study of U.S. Navy and Confederate Navy shipwrecks in Florida. Responsible for administrating the Florida Historical Resources Act which includes responsibility for archeological resources on public land, BAR began the Florida Navy Legacy Shipwreck Project as part of the state's ongoing inventory of terrestrial and submerged cultural resources. The project is being carried out in conjunction with the Naval Historical Center (NHC) and is funded through the Department of Defense's Legacy Resource Management Program. Legal title to most sunken U.S. naval vessels throughout the world rests with the NHC. The NHC is responsible for assembling information on all naval shipwrecks and for developing protective management strategies for all of them. The NHC is developing cooperative agreements with the other states and jurisdictions to help them study and manage naval shipwrecks. The Project has also assembled historical information on the U.S.S. *Narcissus*.