

BIOGEOGRAPHY BRANCH

CENTER FOR COASTAL MONITORING & ASSESSMENT
NATIONAL CENTERS FOR COASTAL OCEAN SCIENCE



Sea Floor Characterization of the U.S. Caribbean 2011 Field Season Day 18: April 14, 2011

Perspective from the Bridge

As the NOAA ship *Nancy Foster* conducts Project NF-11-1, "Characterization of the Seafloor Habitats of the U.S. Caribbean", it is clear the science is the star of the show, especially with the exciting discovery of several previously undiscovered shipwrecks off the coast of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. However, there is more to the story than colorful hydrographic survey maps and scientists fully decked out in REI's spring apparel lineup. From the perspective of ENS Bryan Begun, a NOAA Corps officer, here is what things look like from the bridge of the ship.



ENS Bryan Begun (right), ENS Jamie Park (left), LCDR Steve Meador (back) on the bridge of the *Nancy Foster*

What is it that officers do on the bridge of a NOAA ship? To oversimplify an answer, we drive the boat. To dig a bit deeper, we navigate, we monitor weather, and we avoid hitting things, especially objects larger than us like cruise ships and islands. As if this wasn't enough, we then incorporate the operational requests from the science party; Launch small boats. Run survey lines. Deploy an ROV (remotely operated vehicle). We do things that severely restrict the maneuverability of the ship, and by the way, can we please do these things in areas of heavy ship traffic?

It wouldn't be fun if it wasn't a challenge, and that is what makes working on a NOAA Ship highly rewarding. On this project, NF-11-1, there are three main operations; by day we deploy a small boat which can work remotely while the ship is deploying an ROV to explore the seafloor, sending video and other information back to the surface. By night, we run survey lines, using the ship's multibeam echo sounder to produce high resolution imagery of the ocean bottom. This multibeam equipment is especially good at highlighting shipwrecks, and their discovery gives this project an adventurous sensation, as if a maritime version of Indiana Jones might parachute in at any time.



Conducting hydrographic survey lines

Things can get hectic at times, especially as we try to launch the ROV with multiple cruise ships crisscrossing our position and background chatter provided by yachties squawking away on VHF Channel 16, making dinner reservations at the yacht club. I am always amused and annoyed by such radio chatter, as CH. 16 is meant for hailing and distress purposes, not as a party planning communication service. But if I didn't have something to complain about, things might get boring.

And truth be told, things can get slow. At night, we drive the ship in perfectly straight lines, sometimes for an hour at a time, to accomplish hydrographic surveys. This can get a little monotonous, so we find ways to entertain ourselves.

For example, we keep a log of awful ship names that we encounter. Recent additions to the log include "Dance Smartly" and "Don Alfredo" (what is that, the Godfather of Pasta?), or my personal favorite "M.Y. Skat". But fun and joke aside, the bridge of a NOAA Ship is a complicated, demanding place. Standing up there as the Officer of the Deck, in charge during my 4 hour shift, I am constantly thinking about how to best accomplish the scientific mission while also keeping the lives of the 35 people aboard safe and sound. It's a lot of responsibility, but a lot of fun too, and the kicker is that we are actually doing something that matters. And that feels good.



AIS technology aids in easy ship identification

Highlights from the ROV Dives



Caribbean reef shark



Boulder star coral



Bermuda chub



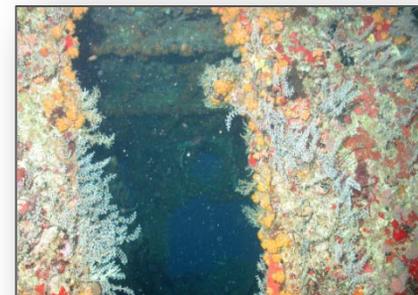
Mutton snapper



Southern sting ray



Horse-eye jacks



Orange cup corals on ship wreck



Atlantic spadefish



Bushy black coral