

ALUMNI NOTES

FALL 2009

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BRETT SEYMOUR/NPS

“The research is fun — to take what you did in the field and give it meaning and give it a story. But, of course, diving is really the fun part.”

— **Sami Seeb** (UNI'03), an archaeologist with the National Park Service's Submerged Resources Center, mapping a wrecked workboat in Lake Mohave. Page 65

ALUM PROFILE

Beneath the Surface

An underwater archaeologist on life before the flood

THE DECK OF the U.S.S. *Arizona*, bombed on December 7, 1941, and resting at the bottom of Pearl Harbor, is strewn with eerie reminders of life aboard the battleship: a cooking pot, a desk fan, bottles of aftershave, a medicine case containing a razor, disposable blades, and a shot glass. Now a national memorial, the wreck is off limits to all but U.S. Navy and National Park Service (NPS) divers.

Sami Seeb is among the few who have seen the ship, with its three remaining fourteen-inch guns in the forward turret, up close. As an archaeologist with the NPS Submerged Resources Center, Seeb's first assignment in 2006 was a three-week dive to conduct routine research on the wreck.

"It was an amazing experience to dive on the *Arizona*," says Seeb (UNI'03). "It made it very real — to see all these artifacts, to see the fan that was probably sitting on somebody's desk right in front of me was incredible."

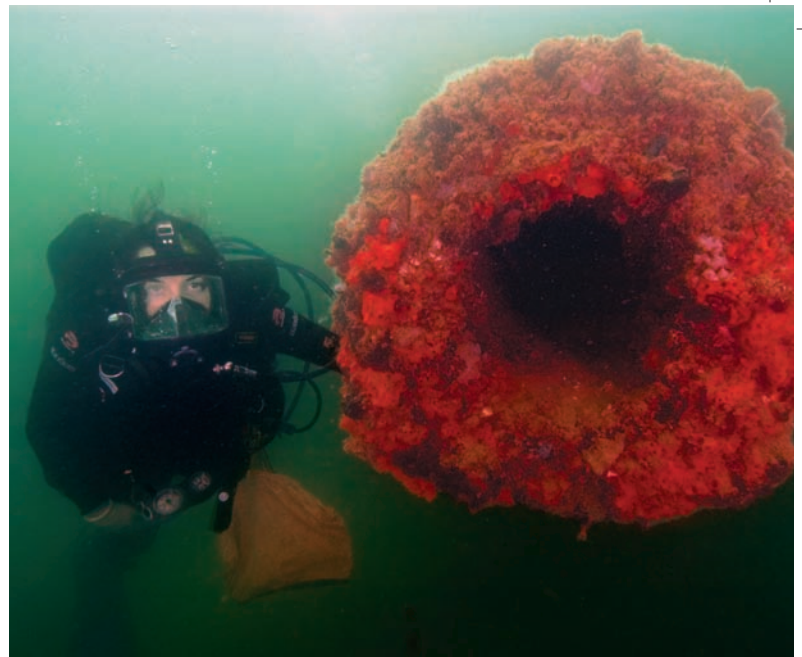
Based in Lakewood, Colorado, the center researches and helps maintain submerged resources, such as shipwrecks, downed planes, or flooded towns, in the national park system. Seeb's colleagues have been studying the *Arizona* since the 1980s, when divers first created a detailed map of the ship and an inventory of the artifacts on deck and nearby.

Seeb and her fellow divers checked the location and condition of those artifacts and monitored the ship's movement and the environmental impact of leaking oil. But for the explosive tear near the bow, the ship is relatively

Sami Seeb says diving the U.S.S. *Arizona* (top) gave her a close-up view of one of the wreck's fourteen-inch guns.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRETT SEYMOUR/NPS



intact; the area hasn't been much disturbed by currents or by human contact. "It's a really protected harbor," she says, "which is why the military used it in the first place. And we never go inside, because it's a memorial, and over 1,000 men did lose their lives on the *Arizona*."

Seeb has been a certified diver since she was twelve and has been exploring shipwrecks since she was sixteen. In the University Professors Program, she studied underwater archaeology, a major she designed; later she earned a master's in maritime history and nautical archaeology at East Carolina University. She joined the Park Service in 2006.

For the last two and a half years, Seeb has been working on a project at Lake Mead National Recreation Area, which surrounds Hoover Dam. Divers are conducting surveys of the lake and creating inventories of the submerged resources: sunken boats, infrastructure used during the dam's construction, and a B-29 bomber that had been involved in top-secret Cold War research in the late 1940s.

"There's an Anasazi settlement, an entire pueblo that was submerged when they built the dam," Seeb says. "And there's a Mormon town that was submerged. The last residents actually had to row away as the waters of the Colorado River came up to create Lake Mead."

In Lake Mohave, just south of the dam, divers have found a ninety-seven-foot gold dredge, used to mine the bottom of rivers. "It operated for a year before it sank," Seeb says. "And you have to wonder, really, why it sank and if there were any mysterious activities. Maybe it wasn't making any money. The Colorado River flowed really fast through this canyon at the time, in 1909. Maybe it was too difficult to operate. Insurance fraud was very common in various maritime industries."

No matter the project, Seeb is always amazed by what she finds. Her next field project is at Channel Islands National Park, in Ventura, California, where divers will inspect a variety of submerged sites.

"Any remains of human activity that end up underwater for whatever reason are just incredible to see in this environment that they weren't meant to be in," she says. "And it's fun to explore and study them and figure out what they tell us about the people who built them or used them."

CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI