

# THE LOST TREASURES OF IPIUTAK

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## ABSTRACT

The Ipiutak culture of northwestern Alaska ranks among the most mysterious and intriguing traditions of the northern world. The site, excavated in the late 1930s and early 1940s by Danish archaeologist Helge Larsen and American archaeologists Froelich Rainey and J. Louis Giddings, is located near the modern village of Point Hope. Artifacts recovered from the initial excavations included jet-inlaid ivory death masks, ivory carvings, dance pendants, hunting implements, and more. A shipment of the finest artifacts was sent to the American Museum of Natural History in New York to be photographed for publication purposes. These Ipiutak materials were shipped back to the University of Alaska Museum in September 1946. In November of that year, the U.S. Post Office informed the Museum of Natural History that a letter and specimen list sent two days in advance of the artifacts were lost when a U.S. Army Transport ship sank. In the summer of 2003, the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) received a report that something was producing an oil sheen on the water surface about 1.35 nautical miles southeast of James Point on the west side of Grenville Channel, British Columbia. In October 2003, the CCG deployed a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) to investigate the source of the pollution. During their inspection they determined that the source of the oil was a shipwreck. Research established that the ship was most likely that of the U.S. Army Transport *Brigadier General M. G. Zalinski*. This paper will investigate whether she is the missing army transport that was transporting the Ipiutak artifacts.

## THE IPIUTAK SITE

The Ipiutak archaeological site, situated on an accretional spit near the modern village of Point Hope, Alaska, has received considerable publicity and provoked speculation on the culture of the inhabitants, resulting not least from the extensive habitation remains and the variety and quantity of carved ivory and other artworks (Bandi 1969; Giddings 1967; Hilton et al. 2014). The site was identified in 1939 by archaeologists Helge Larsen of Denmark and Froelich Rainey of the United States, who were searching for traces of early “Eskimo” settlements. They chose to examine the Ipiutak site (Fig. 1) after recalling a comment made by Danish anthropologist Knud Rasmussen that the old village of Tigara at Point Hope was one of the largest and most interesting sites along the Arctic Coast (Larsen and

Rainey 1948:5). At the time, Larsen was a curator in the Danish National Museum while Rainey was a professor of anthropology at the University of Alaska. Larsen and Rainey, accompanied by J. Louis Giddings, made their first expedition to Point Hope and Ipiutak in the summer of 1939 and continued their work in the field and in the laboratory for three years. In the summer of 1941 they were joined by Harry L. Shapiro of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), who supervised the excavation of the Tigara burials and made anthropometric measurements of the Inuit then living at Point Hope.

The archaeological work at Ipiutak began on areas where cultural material was exposed, then house sites were studied, and finally graves were excavated (Giddings

1967; Larsen and Rainey 1948). Restricted to one area of the site, the elaborate nature of the graves at Ipiutak was uncharacteristic of the Inuit (Larsen and Rainey 1948:61; Mason 2016). Not only were the grave accessories different from those of other known Bering Strait cultures, the manner of some burials was also remarkable. Some graves held bodies with composite ivory “death masks” (Fig. 2) and skulls with eyes of inlaid jet and ivory. Some graves held mummified birds or other animals, again with eyes inlaid with obsidian. In several graves, the human body was buried with walrus bones; in four others, humans were buried with dog skeletons (Larsen and Rainey 1948:61, 248). The excavations at Ipiutak produced some 10,000 artifacts and 500 skeletons, and Rainey estimated the site could have supported a population of 5000 people. Radiocarbon assays suggest that the site was founded prior to AD 600, with an upper age limit in the ninth century (Mason 2006).

World War II interrupted the research and analysis work: Rainey entered U.S. government service in 1942, and Giddings joined the U.S. Navy in 1943. Rainey’s absence placed the bulk of the library research and the writing on Larsen, who was on the staff of the University of Alaska Museum from 1943 to 1945. In 1945, Larsen divided the large collection of Ipiutak material housed in the University of Alaska Museum into specimens to be retained by the University of Alaska Museum, the Danish

Museum, and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) (West 1978). The “best” artistic specimens and other artifacts to be illustrated in Larsen and Rainey’s report, *Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture* (1948), were sent to the AMNH to be photographed for the production of plates to be inserted into the report. Later, when these items were shipped back to the University of Alaska Museum on a U.S. Army Transport (USAT) ship, they were lost at sea.

## LOSS OF IPIUTAK ARTIFACTS

To determine what happened to the artifacts has meant reviewing the correspondence record about the artifacts. The trail of clues begins at the AMNH. On September 16, 1946, Bella Weitzner, associate curator of ethnology at the AMNH, wrote a letter to Ivar Skarland at the University of Alaska. She apologized for the delay in returning the artifacts and explained that with Larsen and Rainey out of the country, the task of checking the material belonging to the three institutions had fallen to her, it had been a long and drawn-out task, and she had finally reached a stage of

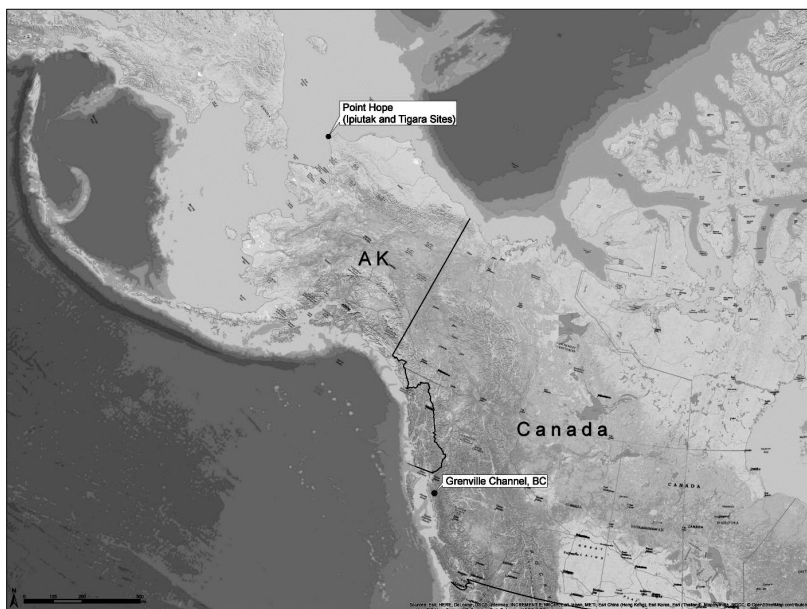


Figure 1. Location of Ipiutak and Tigara sites at Point Hope and Grenville Channel. Map by Robert Clark.



Figure 2. Burial mask from Ipiutak grave site, published as plate 55 in Larsen and Rainey (1948). Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History Catalog #60.1/7713 A-K.

completion that made it possible to return the specimens belonging to the university. Her letter continues:

You will find that the specimens have been wrapped and labeled according to their plate and figure numbers. Since we always use the catalog numbers as part of the record when specimens are published, it would be necessary for you to give us the University of Alaska catalog numbers for each one of these pieces. Will you be good enough, therefore to enter your catalog number in the proper place on each of the work sheets for the plates, a set of which we are forwarding with this letter? Please return the sheets to me when you have filled in the catalog number. (Weitzner 1946a)

Weitzner (1946b) wrote a follow-up letter to Skarland on November 7 inquiring if the Ipiutak materials had reached the University of Alaska safely. She also requested that the list of specimen numbers be returned, so that the captions for the photographs taken for Larsen and Rainey’s report could be completed (Weitzner 1946b). University of Alaska archaeologist J. Louis Giddings responded on behalf of Skarland on November 11. Giddings (1946) explained that a West Coast shipping strike had held up express and freight shipments to the Territory of Alaska for two months, and cessation of the strike was not yet in sight. He indicated he would try to provide the requested information as soon as the Ipiutak material was received. Weitzner (1946c) wrote back on November 18 stating that “unfortunately a day or two after I wrote to Mr. Skarland on November 7th we were notified by the Post Office that the army transport carrying the letter and the accompanying lists was sunk and presumably the mail it carried was lost.”

She noted that the Ipiutak specimens had been forwarded from New York on September 18 by insured parcel post, leading her to assume that they could not possibly have been on the same ship and should therefore arrive at the college soon after shipping began to move again on the Pacific Coast (Weitzner 1946c). On March 24, 1947, Giddings informed Weitzner: “I am afraid this is bad news. The shipment of Ipiutak material has not been heard from at this end, and now the backlog of mail from Seattle and Southern Alaska is largely cleared” (Giddings 1947). It thus appears that although the specimen list was shipped from New York City on September 17 and the specimens a day later, they both ended up on the same USAT vessel leaving Seattle for Alaska.

**LOSS OF USAT *BRIGADIER GENERAL*  
*M. G. ZALINSKI***

The *Brigadier General M. G. Zalinski* was originally launched as the steel freighter *Lake Frohna* in July 1919. She was an ocean freighter of the typical three-island, four-hatch, two-mast type (Fig. 3). Her registered length was 251 feet, the width 43.5 feet, and the depth 26.16 feet. She had a gross tonnage of 2616 and net tonnage of 1611.

When the United States entered the Second World War in December 1941, the U.S. Army’s Quartermaster Corps requisitioned the ship and renamed her USAT *Brigadier General M. G. Zalinski*. The transport ship was then put into service running supplies north to Alaska out of Seattle, its port of embarkation throughout World War II and after the war. The Puget Sound Pilots movements cards reveal the final movements of the *Brigadier General M. G. Zalinski*. She sailed from Seattle on June 8, 1946, returned, and then left again for Alaska on July 10. The cargo ship was back in Seattle on August 9 and left again on August 23.

Archie McLaren, the purser on board *Zalinski*, recalled that his ship left Seattle for the final time in the early-morning hours on September 26, 1946, bound for Whittier, Alaska (McLaren 1988). The *Zalinski* was reported to be carrying 1,115 tons of food and 778 tons of general cargo. Included in this cargo were household goods for military personnel and a full load of fresh fruit and produce. John Fitzgerald from the National Archives in Seattle found the USAT Ocean Manifest.<sup>1</sup> It records that *Zalinski* loaded at Pier 36 with U.S. mail consigned to the postmaster in Whittier. The quantity and weight were recorded as follows (Table 1):

*Table 1. Mail consigned to Whittier postmaster*

Quantity	Type	Weight
1,166 pcs.	SKS mail	52,470 lbs.
469 pcs.	Outside mail	21,105 lbs.
29 pcs.	Pouches 1st class mail	1,050 lbs.
6 pcs.	Outside 1st class mail	20 lbs.

According to McLaren (1988:137):

The *Zalinski* was far down the priority list to have radar equipment installed. Navy vessels had a much higher priority. So we had to go up the Inside Passage the “old fashioned way” as ships had been doing for decades past. They bounced whistles off



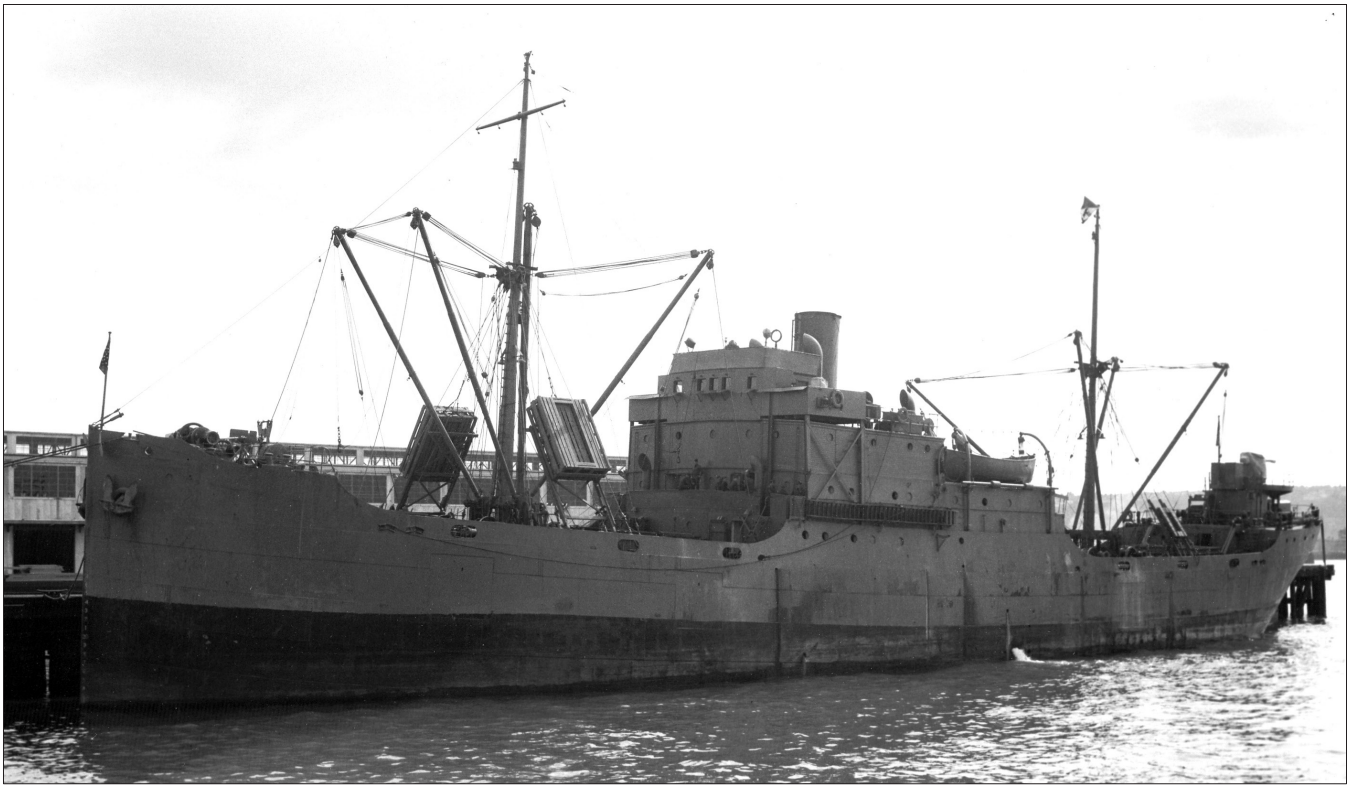


Figure 3. Brigadier General M. G. Zalinski in U.S. Army Transport Service. Courtesy of Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society, Williamson Collection Image #1050-1.

the shore and determined the distance from land by the length of the echo.

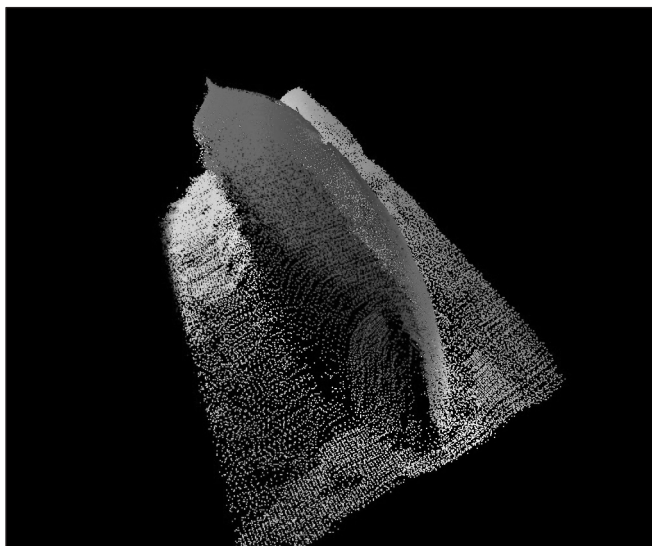
McClaren's account provided further important details about the voyage. It was raining heavily when the ship reached Grenville Channel, British Columbia, making it next to impossible to navigate, as the heavy rain was muffling all sound. Around three in the morning, the crew was awakened by the ship suddenly taking a severe jolt, quickly followed by emergency blasts of the ship's whistle. The *Zalinski* was already listing to starboard when the crew lined up to get in the lifeboats. Reportedly, the force of the collision broke the nos. 1 and 2 holds wide open—a tear about 12 m long. The ship had struck the rocks off Pitt Island, a few miles south of Lowe Inlet. All forty-eight of the *Zalinski*'s crew were able to get away in the two port lifeboats. The veteran steamer sank twenty-five minutes after colliding with the rocks and was reported to have gone down in 152 m of water.

### ZALINSKI IS FOUND

The *Zalinski* remained forgotten on the bottom of Grenville Channel for fifty-seven years. In the summer of

2003, the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) received a report that something was producing an oil sheen on the water surface about 1.35 nautical miles southeast of James Point on the west side of Grenville Channel. On October 30 the Coast Guard deployed its Phantom HD2 remotely operated vehicle (ROV) to investigate the source of the oil; during the inspection the Coast Guard determined that the source of the oil was a shipwreck (Gillard 2003). The vessel was found to be lying upside down on a rock ledge in 27 m of water; it was approximately 65–70 m long and had a single propeller (Fig. 4). The superstructure had collapsed so that the hull rested primarily on its bulwarks with a list toward deep water.

Jody Goffic, program support officer of the CCG, began making inquiries to try to identify the vessel. He contacted the Vancouver Maritime Museum and subsequently the Underwater Archaeological Society of BC (UASBC).<sup>2</sup> Only two vessels were identified as being lost in the vicinity of Lowe Inlet: *MV Ravalli* was a wooden freighter that burned at Lowe Inlet on June 14, 1918, and the steel freighter *Zalinski* sank in Grenville Channel on September 29, 1946. Eventually, the Coast Guard found a story about the sinking of the *Brigadier General M. G. Zalinski* in an



*Figure 4. Multibeam scan of Zalinski looking south from bow. Courtesy Canadian Hydrographic Service.*

issue of the *Prince Rupert Daily News* (1946). Further research confirmed that the ship specifications were consistent with the *Brigadier General M. G. Zalinski*. Dives completed by two other groups also confirmed that the ship was the *Zalinski*. A group of technical divers, led by Brian Nadwidny, visited the wreck in 2010 and again in 2012.<sup>3</sup> Nadwidny reported an overturned vessel made of steel with a single propeller (Fig. 5), and found some pop bottles and truck axles in the bow area on the lower side

(Fig. 6). The divers found the stern area to be suspended above a drop-off and accessible by swimming up underneath. They also reported seeing bombs and other material on site, suggesting the ship was a military vessel.

The Canadian Navy Fleet Dive Unit conducted reconnaissance dives on the site between June 2 and June 5, 2011. During their dives they found several 250 lb. and 500 lb. bombs and at least two 1000 lb. bombs. While investigating the forward part of the ship, they also located and recovered the ship's bell, which is embossed "Lake Frohna"—the name of the *Zalinski* at the time of her launch.<sup>4</sup>

### **WAS THE IPIUTAK MATERIAL PUT ABOARD ZALINSKI?**

The initial association of the Ipiutak artifacts and *Zalinski* began in 2005, when Mike Burwell was contacted by an Alaskan news reporter looking for information about the lost artifacts. Burwell made contact with Alaska archaeologists Anne Jensen and Glenn Sheehan in Barrow and Owen Mason in Anchorage, all of whom were associated with more recent excavations at Point Hope. These contacts confirmed the story of the lost artifacts, but no one had ever attempted to identify the lost ship. While searching the Alaska shipwrecks database for likely ships, Burwell found McGillivray's (2006) article on the internet.



*Figure 5. Photograph showing Zalinski propeller, courtesy of Brian Nadwidny.*





Figure 6. Photograph showing truck axle, courtesy of Brian Nadwidny.

At the same time he made contact with British Columbia maritime historian Rick James, who was researching the *Zalinski* for the book *Historic Shipwrecks of the Central Coast* (James and Marc 2010). The convergence of this research convinced Burwell that the *Zalinski* had carried the Ipiutak artifacts back to Alaska.<sup>5</sup>

There is a strong likelihood that the Ipiutak material was aboard the *Zalinski* based on the evidence. An AMNH “Shipping Notice and Request for Packing” was completed on September 16, 1946. The packing slip listed a single package containing archaeological specimens from Point Hope, Alaska (identified as the property of the University of Alaska); it was addressed to Mr. Ivar Skarland, University of Alaska College, Alaska, and insured for \$500. A note on the back of the packing slip reads, “Tracer Pkg September 18, V44845 insured \$200 Fee \$1.88. Sept 17, Letter Rec. 462440—59 cents.” One must assume that this note was made by a staffer at the AMNH after the artifacts had been shipped.

A shipping strike in Seattle during the fall of 1946 meant that much of the mail and food shipments to Alaska were being handled by U.S. Army Transport ships. We know from an Army ocean manifest that, in addition to general cargo, the *Zalinski* loaded mail consigned to the postmaster in Whittier. If the mail containing the Ipiutak artifacts had been put on a train leaving New York, it would have made it to Seattle in three to

four days. Assuming that it arrived on September 22 or 23, there would have been plenty of time for it to have been consigned to the *Zalinski*. The fact that it never made it to Alaska hints strongly that the material was aboard the *Zalinski*. There are no other reports of a USAT vessel sinking during this same time period on the West Coast. To further support the above supposition, the reader will recall that Bella Weitzner of the AMNH recounted in her correspondence with the University of Alaska that the post office notified them on or around November 8, 1946, that the army transport carrying the letter and the accompanying lists had sunk, and presumably the mail it carried was lost. A footnote at the bottom of the AMNH shipping notice reads: “Tracer—March 27, 1947. ‘Boat sunk material and list lost.’” A further note on the back of the shipping notice reads, “US Army Transport Brig. Gen. Zalinski Lost—Sept. 29, 1946.” The final note suggests the author knew about the potential loss and which vessel the material may have been on.

#### WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE OIL LEAK?

After determining what was producing the oil slick in Grenville Channel, the CCG hired commercial divers to patch the small holes that were allowing the oil to escape. The vessel continued to release oil on and off for several more years (O’Neil 2006). In September 2013 the Coast

Guard began to make preparations to remove the oil from the *Zalinski*. Upon learning about this endeavor through the media, the UASBC advised the Coast Guard, by way of the BC Archaeology Branch, that the vessel was protected by the British Columbia Heritage Conservation Act and potentially contained a cargo of culturally significant artifacts. Initially, there was some resistance to dealing with the heritage aspects of the wreck, as the Coast Guard considered the *Zalinski* a United States military vessel and as such the British Columbia Heritage Conservation Act would not apply. The UASBC stressed that even if the *Zalinski* was not covered under the Heritage Conservation Act, there was international and United States legislation governing sunken warships to consider.

The author contacted the AMNH on October 10, 2013, to try and confirm if there was evidence linking the missing artifacts to the *Zalinski*. The AMNH in turn provided key documentation (cited earlier) that substantially confirmed that the *Zalinski* had the Ipiutak artifacts on board. After being briefed about the potential Ipiutak cargo, the Coast Guard agreed to be on the lookout for this material in the course of their work, and if anything was found, they would limit any action to documenting and visually recording the location of the collection.<sup>6</sup> The oil recovery went ahead without incident during October and November 2013. The bunker C oil tanks were tapped through the upturned hull so little or no wreck penetration was warranted. As such, no evidence of the artifacts was found. Approximately 44,000 liters of heavy bunker C oil were removed from the wreck.

### WHAT IS THE LIKELIHOOD OF FINDING THE IPIUTAK ARTIFACTS?

The Coast Guard ROV inspection identified that the vessel lies upside down on a rock ledge in 27 m of water (Gillard 2003). The superstructure has collapsed so that the hull rests primarily on its bulwarks with a list toward deep water. The bow is facing north—the direction in which the vessel was headed at the time of her sinking. The hull is buckled about one-third of the way back from the stern. The top of the upturned hull is in 19 m of water, and the propeller is at 24 m. The navy divers reported that there is some restricted access to forward hold no. 1 while holds no. 2 and 3 appear to be completely inaccessible. The hatch opening to hold no. 4 hangs over a drop-off, and much of its contents have spilled out into deep water.

Brian Nadwidny and his group explored down to 61 m. He stated that there are artifacts including several portholes, more bombs, and a helm on a ledge in deep water. Also, he said that they were able to enter and explore the rear hold, but that there was not much in it. If the artifacts were in the aft hold, they are likely lost. If they are in one of the forward holds, there is a good chance that they are still within the vessel buried amongst the other cargo. To know where to look would require learning where the mail might have been carried on the ship. To date we have not been able to find a cargo stowage layout as to where it might have been in the vessel. The second challenge would be to understand what to look for. To determine what might be in the package, Alaska historian and researcher Mike Burwell went through the plates in the Larsen-Rainey report and itemized the University of Alaska specimens that were missing and their accession numbers. By Burwell's count, there were 223 separate artifacts wrapped, packed, and shipped by the AMNH.<sup>7</sup> The contents of the package includes ivory, bone, and stone objects in the form of arrowheads, stone implements, bone implements, blades, carvings, and burial masks. Given the sheer number of artifacts, we have concluded that the shipping box would have been at least the size of a small moving box, perhaps 60 x 60 x 60 cm, and most likely made of wood to protect the artifacts from damage. After seventy years underwater, it is unlikely that the box would remain intact. Even if the wood held up, the nails would have rusted out years ago, which means the box would at the very least have fallen apart. If the box was packed tightly amongst other mail cargo, there is a strong chance the artifacts would remain tightly grouped. If the box was placed in an unsecured area, the artifacts could be spread around a larger area. If the box was on top of the mail, it would have become buried when the vessel rolled upside down.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the evidence presented, it is highly probable that the Ipiutak treasure is aboard the *Zalinski*. The Sunken Military Craft Act of 2005, Sections 1401–1408 confirms right, title, and interest of the United States in and to any U.S. sunken military craft anywhere in the world. This means the U.S. Army would still have rights to the *Zalinski*. As such, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration would likely be the responsible agency for the management of the submerged cultural heritage

resources aboard *Zalinski*. Given the upside-down nature of the wreck, its deteriorating condition, and the presence of ordnance, trying to locate the artifacts could become an expensive and risky operation. The most important question to be answered is: Are there any artifacts in the lost collection that are not represented in the three Ipiutak repositories (i.e., University of Alaska Museum, the Danish Museum, and the AMNH)? If the answer is yes, and it can be shown that there are some obvious and significant oversights in the current collections, only then should searching the ship be contemplated. To search the ship would require further research to determine where the mail would have been stored. Divers could be used to inspect accessible areas of the ship. However, it is likely that the artifacts are in one of the currently inaccessible holds or even in an enclosed interior space. To locate them would require the use of a small ROV capable of operating in confined spaces. An alternate approach would be to use divers with pole-mounted video cameras that could be inserted into openings in the hull to inspect the contents of each space. If by chance the artifacts were located, the second challenge would be how to remove them safely from the wreck using recognized archaeological techniques. Recovery comes with its own baggage. What sort of conditions would the artifacts be in? Obviously, the stone implements would be fine. However, the bone and ivory pieces would require immediate on-site conservation. While we now have solid evidence suggesting that we know where the Ipiutak treasures are, it may be that the challenges to their recovery are insurmountable.

## NOTES

1. John Fitzgerald, e-mail message to Mike Burwell regarding mail manifest (August 29, 2013).
2. Jody Goffic, e-mail message to Susan Buss at the Vancouver Maritime Museum seeking identity of wreck (October 16, 2003).
3. Brian Nadwidny, e-mail message to author regarding wreck condition (June 24, 2010).
4. Rob DeProy, e-mail message to author regarding wreck condition and bell recovery (August 15, 2011).
5. Mike Burwell, e-mail message to author concerning *Zalinski*–Ipiutak relationship (June 5, 2015).
6. Mike Grebler, e-mail messages to author regarding oil removal plans (October 7, 8, and 17, 2013).
7. Mike Burwell, e-mail message to author regarding list of lost artifacts (October 16, 2013).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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