WILL NIAGARA KEEP HER GOLD?

A Noted Diver Tells His Story

FEW war stories can equal in romantic quality that of the salvaging of the Niagara's gold; few wartime jobs were better kept secrets; and probably few will retain their interest for so long after the event. For these reasons alone those who can tell the tale of Niagara will always find a ready audience, and doubtless many will be drawn in from the garden next week to tune their radios to 1YA for a personal account of the salvage operations by Diver J. E. Johnstone.

But absorbing though an account of the retrieving of the gold is, there is another aspect of the story which intrigues people even more to-day. Despite the fact that the Niagara sank in 540 foot of water the diving operations were successful. Over 95 per cent.—£2,379,000 worth—of the gold was recovered, but some of the bars were scattered into awkward places and could not be retrieved with the equipment available. Those bars total in value £150,000, a small sum compared with the value of the bars recovered, but otherwise far from negligible.

"Will Niagara ever give up this treasure or is she always to guard it more securely than the most burglar-proof bank vault?"

This is the question in the minds of all who discuss the Niagara and so on the occasion of Mr. Johnstone's visit to Auckland *The Listener* took the opportunity of seeking the opinion of the man best qualified to answer it. Mr. Johnstone revealed that the main reason for his visit was to investigate the possibilities of making a further descent for the gold. It was, he considered, a practical proposition so far as the actual operation was concerned, but he felt that the financial risk involved would probably preclude an attempt being made. He explained that half the gold recovered had to be returned to the bank. Then from the sum received for the other half had to be met heavy taxation, expenditure on special equipment and expensive operating costs, and he doubted whether the possible reward was sufficient to warrant the gamble. "As it looks at the moment I think I stand a better chance of making money by backing a winner at the races," Mr. Johnstone commented. However, he will report back to his syndicate, which includes his brother, who is also a diver and worked with him on the Niagara, and the group will make a decision.

Like most New Zealanders, *The Listener* reporter knew of Mr. Johnstone's work on the Niagara and that he had been called to assist in the refloating of the Wanganella, but what, Mr. Johnstone was asked, had he been doing in the years between the two New Zealand jobs? In the answer lay a story of wartime thrills, and interesting work in widely separated parts of the world.

In February, 1942, Mr. Johnstone's salvage party went to Darwin to help salvage a Japanese submarine of which the Australian Navy wanted particulars. While they were there fitting out their salvage ship, the big Japanese air raid occurred—50,000 tons of shipping was sunk in the first 10 minutes.

"I was in diving rig when the bombers came over. My assistants hauled me to the surface and I reckon I broke all records getting out of a diver's rig. I experienced many bombing raids after that, but none was worse than the 20 minutes at Darwin. The raiders created havoc among shore installations as well as shipping. We lost most of our salvage gear—equipment that was already in short supply. But that first ten minutes of bombing not only called a temporary halt to our work, but changed our whole programme. For the next five years the raising of ships became a full-time job. Of course, the work was not confined to Darwin. The Australian Government organised a salvage unit and we trained as divers 45 men from all walks of life. They were young fellows who wanted adventure and they certainly got all the adventure they wanted before the war ended.

JOHNSTONE IN NEW GUINEA
"A million pounds was saved"

JOHNSTONE IN CALCUTTA
No inebriate's hallucination

"The decision to form a salvage unit resulted in my being sent to the United States to obtain equipment and ships. At the same time I was to gain experience and so I found myself working with American divers on the Normandie for six months."

"Was that the biggest diving job you have been on?"

"Yes, and I doubt if ever we shall see the like of it again. There were 110 divers working in shifts around the clock. The most we ever had on one job was 12 on the 6500-ton Santhia in Hooghly River, Calcutta."

"How did you come to be in India?"

Under the Enemy Nose

"The Indian Government asked for Captain J. P. Williams and myself to inspect the wreck and report on prospects of salvage. I was in New Guinea in 1944 when I received word to return by air to Sydney. When I dropped in home and told my wife I was going to India in a couple of hours she accused me of having been drinking, said I'd better have a meal and told the children to keep quiet 'because Daddy's got a headache'! By the time I reached Calcutta I'd had more than enough of air travel. The Perth to Colombo hop was done direct by land plane in 27 hours. At the time the Japs had Singapore and a hush-hush service was being flown right under their noses—with the odds against the planes getting through. Really an amazing service that!"

"Did you succeed in raising the Santhia?"

"Yes, and a very interesting job it was, though it took nearly a year to do. Our salvage party of 12 from Australia who came over later was augmented with Italian prisoners of war and Indian labour—1,500 men all told."

"Why so many?"

"Well the Santhia lay over on her port side and in order to right her we built, with huge haulks of timber, trestles 30-foot high on her side. From the top of these trestles we had six-inch wire hawsers running to specially constructed land winches. The operation of righting the ship had to be a continuous one and relays from the labour force worked on those winches for three weeks. It was a case of hasten slowly, for the purchase was so great and 360 turns on the winch handles meant only an inch gain in the righting movement. But the gradual strain finally shifted the ship and with the decks exposed we then got the pumps to work and the ship afloat.

"Another job which also involved the righting of a ship was the Air Force vessel Wanaka wrecked on the Great Barrier Reef about the same time, but she presented different problems and the salvage was tackled differently. In her case we used the tides to pull her over. By closing up the hatches and sealing all openings we pumped the ship dry at dead low water. Then with anchors

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