Shipwrecks often capture our interest, but most end up on the seafloor and are never seen. The Titanic is perhaps the best example, although with autonomous underwater vehicles we have now all vicariously visited that 108-year old ship. Monterey Bay actually has two of what can loosely be called shipwrecks.

One is actually just a barge that was being towed north and was washed up onto the beach near the Salinas River mouth during the El Niño winter of 1983, where it remains today, partially buried in sand. Little is known about this 150-foot long barge except for the name Sause Bros. painted on the side. Sause Bros. has been serving the Pacific Rim for over 80 years providing marine transportation with tugs and barges. I was surveying the shoreline impacts of the winter storms near the mouth of the Pajaro River in January 1983 and noticed a tug not far offshore towing a barge north in large swells. I believe that the towline broke and the barge was washed ashore near the Salinas River mouth shortly afterwards.

About 18 lies our other “shipwreck”, which many will argue is not really a shipwreck at all, as it was intentionally beached 90 years ago. The SS Palo Alto, while known locally as the cement ship, is actually a concrete ship, and there is an important difference, but call it what you like.

The 420-foot long Palo Alto was designed as an oil tanker and was built to be part of a fleet of concrete ships constructed in 1918-1919 for the war effort. Intuitively, it doesn’t seem logical that a ship made of concrete would float, but it all has to do with the weight of the volume of water displaced by the ship compared to the weight of the ship itself.

Concrete ships are built of steel and ferrocement or reinforced concrete instead of more traditional materials, such as wood or steel. Their big advantage is that the materials are cheap and readily available. Disadvantages are that construction labor costs are high as are operating costs.

Because of steel shortages during World War I, President Woodrow Wilson approved a program to construct 24 ferrocement ships for the war effort. When the war ended in November 1918, however, only 12 of these ships were under construction and none had yet been completed. One of these was the SS Palo Alto.

I often wondered staring out at that ship now beached at Seacliff, how did they actually build a 420-foot long ferrocement ship? I got my answer about five years ago, when Kim Steinhardt, my good friend and co-author of The Edge, who was a docent at Seacliff State
Beach at the time, shared with me a set of old black and white photos that had recently been rescued from a trash dumpster. A century earlier, an unidentified photographer had painstakingly documented each stage of the ship’s construction, but the large binder of photos eventually made its way into the trash. Fortunately, someone who recognized the possible historical significance retrieved it and turned it in to Seacliff State Beach, where Kim digitized the detailed photos for the state parks so they could be preserved for future viewing and research. The attached photo shows the vast network of steel reinforcing rod that formed the framework, which supported the concrete hull. Other photos in the collection revealed that thousands of wheelbarrow-fulls of concrete were mixed and poured into the steel-and-wood framework.

World War I ended in 1918 before the ship was even completed, however, and ultimately it was sold as surplus to the Seacliff Amusement Company of Nevada and towed from San Francisco to Seacliff Beach in 1930.

The SS Palo Alto was sunk in shallow water with its bow facing into the sea, and a 600-foot long pier was built to connect its stern with the shore. An elaborate superstructure was crafted, housing a ballroom, restaurant, concessions stands, arcade, and even an indoor swimming pool. For the next two years, it operated as an amusement center and party boat, competing with the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. The large waves of the winter of 1932, however, broke the ship’s back. Despite its popularity, the Great Depression also took its toll. This physical and economic decline led to the ship’s closing in 1932. The mechanical equipment and superstructure were sold a few years later to a local wrecker for scrap and salvage. In 1936 the State of California in a bargain sale bought the ship’s hull for one dollar and incorporated it into Seacliff State Beach, where it became a favorite fishing platform for decades.

Storms ultimately cracked the ship further, and due to continuing deterioration, access to the ship itself was finally closed. In the spring of 2005, 75 years after being sunk in shallow water, oil found on wildlife in the area was traced back to the ship. Clean-up operations were initiated. No oil was known to have spilled but birds were believed to have come into contact with the oil by entering the ship’s cracked hull while diving underwater.

The SS Palo Alto had a concrete sister ship, the SS Peralta, also built as an oil tanker for the war effort, but that never saw service. It was converted to a fish cannery, used in Alaska for a while, but also anchored at various points around Monterey Bay, buying fish and canning it right on board in 1926. This caused grief for the local canneries in Monterey and the dispute eventually ended up in court. In 1958 the SS Peralta was purchased by Pacifica Papers to be part of a giant floating breakwater built to protect a pulp and paper mill on the Powell River in British Columbia. The ship remains there today, and at 420-feet long is believed to be the last of the World War I fleet and also the largest concrete ship still afloat.
Interior of SS Palo Alto under construction, 1918.