Seeing Underwater

When tragedy strikes in lakes and rivers, recovery might take days or weeks. New technology can locate lost objects in seconds.

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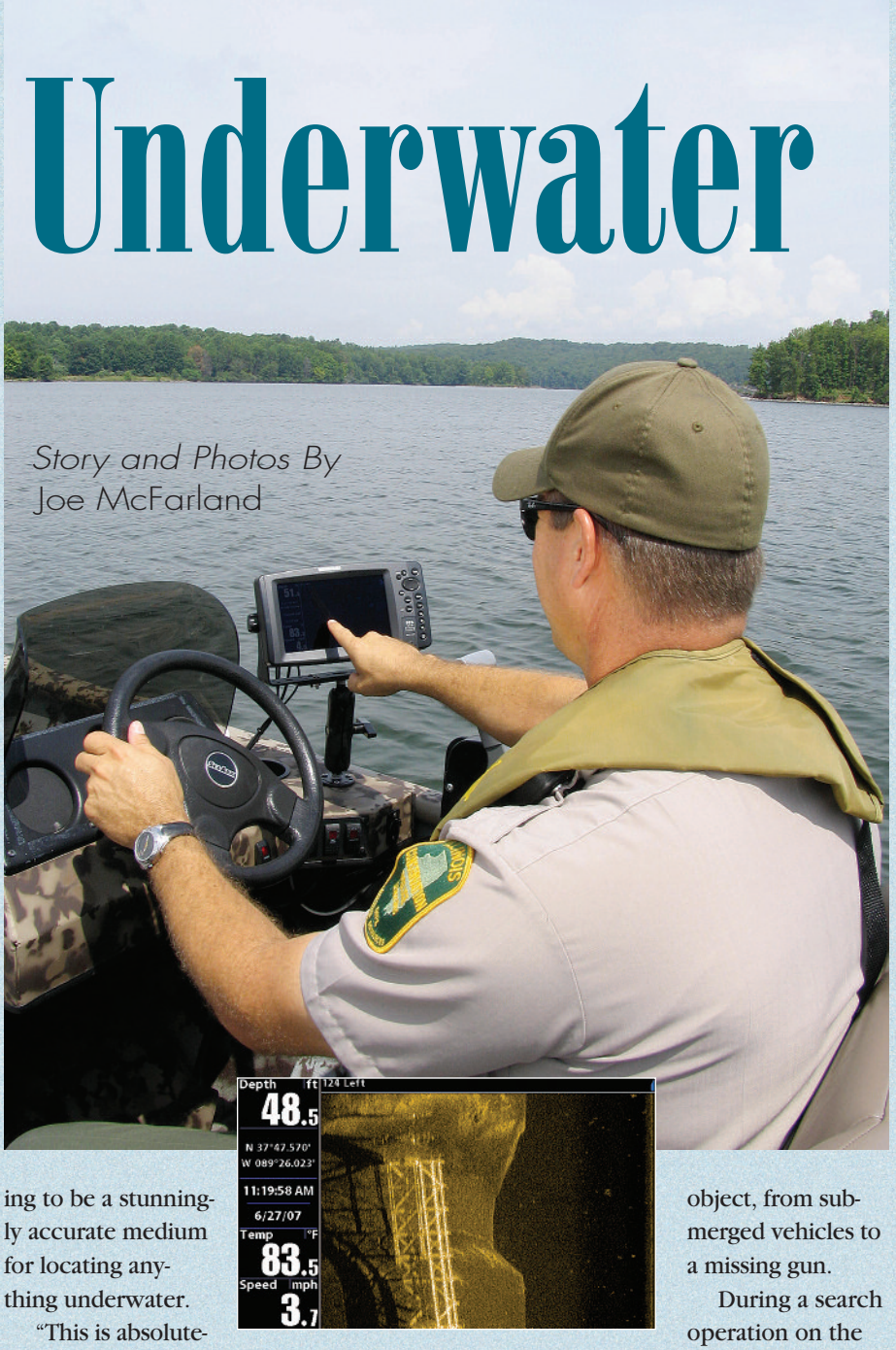

It's been a sad ritual for ages. People searching for a drowning victim years ago had very few options other than simply wait on the shore, or wander the water in boats, looking everywhere. In "Huckleberry Finn," Mark Twain writes of how the firing of canons over water was believed to help locate the victim. It was all they knew how to do.

When modern search and rescue equipment enabled people to dive into the deep waters and peer into the darkness, recovery efforts improved. But only slightly. Divers are still limited by water clarity—a swimmer in murky water can't see, and some recovery efforts never succeed.

Basic sonar is of only slight benefit in underwater search efforts, at best. But a new generation of sonar—originally designed for high-tech anglers—is proving to be a stunningly accurate medium for locating anything underwater.

"This is absolutely the greatest technological development I've seen in all of my years of law enforcement," Conservation Police Sergeant Tony Rendleman announced recently. "It's definitely the greatest tool we have today in search and recovery operations on the water."

What is it? It's the Hummingbird 997c, a fish-finder capable of shooting sonar sideways underwater, thereby blanketing the lake or river bottom. The fine details transmitted to the operator's viewing screen instantly reveal any object, from submerged vehicles to a missing gun.

During a search operation on the Mississippi River in the summer of 2007, Rendleman had barely settled into his patrol boat to begin trolling when he spotted an object on his electronic screen. Search crews working downriver for hours had failed to find anything until Rendleman arrived.

"It's as if you've drained the river or lake and can see everything," he added. "It's that clear."

In addition to speeding up recovery operations following a drowning, the new technology stands to foil the old criminal standby of ditching evidence into a lake.

"If a guy tosses a shotgun in a lake, I'll be able to find it," Rendleman promised.

Conservation Police Sergeant Tony Rendleman uses the high-definition imaging of the Hummingbird 997c to quickly locate objects underwater.