

# THE MALTA Independent

Wednesday 31 May 2000

No. 823

## The Legion of Mary

50 years in Gozo

see pages 18,19

## Corpse of French diving instructor drifted all the way from Toulon

• Victim had been in water for six months

Michael Carabott

THE DIVER, whose body was discovered floating off Xghajra coast last Saturday morning, was yesterday identified as being a French diving instructor who had been drifting in the Mediterranean since November.

The woman, 31-year-old Stephanie Poitrat, went missing in November when she and a companion were diving off the south coast of France, near Toulon.

The water in which they were diving was deep, but very cold, explaining the dry-suit which is usually used for deep sea diving.

The woman's body was spotted floating in the sea, just off Xghajra, at around 9am on Saturday morning by a public convenience watchman.

The recovery of the body was hampered by rough seas, but a courageous joint operation by the police and the Armed Forces Air Wing and Maritime Squadron eventually saw the recovery of Ms Poitrat's body.

The severe state of decomposi-

tion of the body meant identification was extremely difficult, and an initial mistake was made regarding the victim's sex.

The corpse was taken to St Luke's for an autopsy, and there pathologists established that the body was in fact a woman's. In addition, they saw that she was wearing a bracelet with the name "Stephanie" inscribed on it.

Sources close to the investigation said that during the past weeks, the sea conditions near Malta were very rough, and the added high winds helped the corpse drift close to Maltese shores.

The source said that normally the corpse would have been spotted by a passing ship or aircraft but due to the dark diving suit worn by the diver it could have been mistaken for driftwood or other floating material. In fact, at first, eyewitnesses to the recovery operation thought the body was a tyre.

The woman's identity was actually established by chance, when court appointed diving experts were looking for the diving suit serial number in an effort to trace

the owner.

At first, it was thought that the victim was German because of the equipment she was using. Diving experts are understood to have thought that the type of suit and computerised diving gadgets were German.

However, upon discovery of the victim's name, the Maltese police contacted Interpol and made a missing persons enquiry. In fact, French police contacted their Maltese counterparts and informed them that a Stephanie Poitrat had been reported missing in the second week of November 1999.

Sources told *The Malta Independent* that the woman's husband will arrive in Malta tomorrow, and arrangements are being made with the French Embassy to have the body transported to France at the earliest opportunity.

Assistant Police Commissioner John Rizzo and Zabbar District Police, led by Inspector Marisa Camilleri led investigations. Court-appointed expert Captain Rueben Lanfranco headed investigations as regards diving.