

## August 2001

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### Plonger D'Accident Fantastique



Major Werner Pluskat held his steaming coffee close to his face and inhaled deeply. Invigorated by the aroma, he gazed from his bunker, high above Omaha Beach in German occupied France. He looked out across the flat water of the English Channel and shook his head - only the day before, violent winds had stirred up huge waves that had crashed furiously on to the beach defences below. The early morning light glinted off something on the horizon. He lazily raised his field glasses to view the cause of the sun splash, and froze..... Streaming across the horizon was a ten-mile swathe of ships of all descriptions and they were headed directly for him! It was the 6th of June 1944, and the Allies were mounting the greatest amphibious assault the world had ever seen - D-Day had arrived.

The legacy of this pivotal day in World War II, and of the months that followed lies scattered across the Baie de Seine, off France's Normandy coast. From a diver's viewpoint it is an exciting and little explored graveyard of wrecks, offering the opportunity to discover fascinating artefacts while experiencing a stirring time capsule from the past.

We boarded the White Horse in Weymouth, unloading a seemingly endless procession of cylinders, pony bottles, dive bags and weight belts, and went below decks to investigate our accommodation. "Cosy" bunk holes were allocated by height and width – the White Horse was not designed with longer or broader people in mind! In the early hours of the morning the engine chugged to life and we set off for Normandy following the same path taken by the invading armada almost sixty years before. As soon as we hit the open sea, the motion of the boat changed and I was actually relieved to be confined in the tight space of my cubby-hole as we pitched and rolled to France.

As we neared the Cherbourg peninsula the group slowly began to appear above decks – it is always amusing watching landlubbers finding their sea legs, and the White Horse had us all stumbling drunkenly about! An air of excited anticipation hung over the boat as we prepared to make our first dive. The Ussa, sunk in 1917, although not actually a WWI wreck, provided a mouth-watering glimpse of what Normandy has to offer. This British armed merchantman lies in 24m, standing 6m at the stern. Initially it was hard to believe that this was the English Channel – 12m visibility ensured clear views of the superstructure and the large intact propeller. The wreck was covered with large orange sea fans and big adult fish sheltered in its recesses. In an area of collapsed piping an enormous conger eel glared at us from the safety of its lair. The scallops that provided a tasty snack for breakfast were as big as dinner plates. Back on deck the buzz of conversation spoke of a good dive had by all. Everyone was looking forward to the remainder of the week.

Our base for the trip was to be the harbour village of St Vaast le Hougue. Every evening we clambered ashore for a drink in a waterside bar followed by a meal in one of the delightful bistros or quaint little restaurants. We consumed bucketfuls of mussels and oysters, and demolished several bowls of exceptional crème brulee. St Vaast has a lock-in harbour since the tidal range is in excess of 7m. Our tides worked out perfectly for diving and each morning we awoke to the sound of the engine as the White Horse slipped out to sea. Ship's breakfasts were outstanding, and Nathan is to be complimented on the hearty fayre he managed to turn out of his tiny galley.

Our second day of diving took us closer in to Omaha Beach. Our first wreck was that of a tank-carrying landing ship (LST 523). Lying broken on its side, the ship has scattered its cargo of twenty Sherman tanks across the seabed. As we approached a huge black shape in the gloom at 27m, I was astonished to see the outlines of dolly wheels and tank tracks. Gary and I discovered that France has enormous shellfish to offer – these wrecks are inhabited by the largest lobsters and crabs I have ever seen! A friendly challenge between buddy pairs ensued, and despite much rivalry, Ray and Gary ultimately came out winners, with a pair of gargantuan lobbies. The ship's mate Nathan, a chef by trade, certainly did these trophies justice, and our diet was supplemented with tasty morsels from the sea.

After a fantastic start to the trip we hit a low point with two dark, disappointing dives. The first, the wreck of the Susan B. Anthony, an American troop carrier yielded a rather apt memento to Rob. Rummaging around in the debris, he discovered a clip of .303 ammunition, probably from a Lee Enfield rifle. It seemed appropriate that an Adventure Diver should have

found an artefact relating back to our home town. After surfacing from the wreck of the Meredith, an American destroyer, the general feeling was one of deflation. The dive was dark and depressing, with little left to suggest we had been on a ship at all. Sensing the mood, Jon Ayling, our skipper, promised a better day to follow. He certainly didn't let us down, dropping us on the 40m Assos. John and I descended through gin clear water, easily able to see other divers 15m below! On the boilers we found two large congers and a giant lobster, before finning along the gunwales towards the bow. A huge shroud of bib hovered around us making the narcosis feel very pleasant.

There is nothing like a rummage dive to lift a divers spirits, and in the afternoon we descended to the fragmented wreck of Steam Gunboat 7. After successfully attacking a German convoy, this gallant little boat was itself sunk by an enemy submarine. The torpedo smashed into the ship's magazine ripping the boat to shreds. As we arrived at the bottom, we found the seabed littered with 20mm shells and rifle rounds. The two Ians came across an unopened ammo box, and Ray brought up two 3 inch shells (which were hastily thrown back once we realised that they were still live). This rather silly dive gave a whole new meaning to the term shell fishing!

Our final full day of diving proved to be the cherry on top of the trip. The group voted the Juno as the dive of the week – I have to agree, if only because I made my first foray into the realm of decompression diving. The narcosis check at 41.5m seemed pointless as an enormous ling sat motionless at the tied off grapple. I couldn't work out if the fish was real or not, so holding up and counting fingers didn't seem to make any sense either! The visibility was splendid, and conger spotting become commonplace – at one point every hole in the deck seemed to be occupied by five or six feet of long grey body with a wide head and sinister eyes. The ever-present cloud of bib drifted back and forth, while lemon sole hid on the sandy bottom. Moving towards the bar we encountered a row of intact portholes, one of which even had the glass in place! All too soon it was time to leave. For those of you thinking of flirting with decompression, be warned! The penalty is a series of long, boring stops in the cold, dark plankton layer. At 3m the surface is so close and yet so very far away.

We put into Cherbourg for our final night and after an excellent and inexpensive meal, retired to the White Horse. Jon had promised us a 5 a.m. dive on the way home – this may just as well have been a night dive and produced an amusing, but potentially disastrous finish, as seven divers ascended into thick fog on a single SMB while the P&O ferry steamed out of the harbour! France threw in one final gesture, as a pair of Minke whales escorted us through the busiest shipping lane in the world.

The verdict? Outstanding and unspoilt diving; cheap, tasty food; excellent alcoholic beverages; friendly natives; and a great atmosphere on the boat will make the White Horse trip to Normandy a regular feature on the Adventure Diver calendar. I can only conclude with Neil's immortal line: "Bonsoir. Tres Bien".

**Words By Anthony Collins**

## "New tricks sought by enlightened dog" ..... an old lag comes clean.

For what seems a good while now, I've fought shy of the whole Nitrox thing. Let me put things in perspective. I've been diving for years, and have always been more than happy to breath God's good air; added to which, I (like a lot of folk) don't take too easily to changing a system of doing things that 'works for me'. I'd read a bit about the alleged benefits of Nitrox and admitted that they sounded real enough, but - what the hell, I get frozen through after 45 minutes in British waters anyway, and I've usually done a roll of film by that time and tend to lose further interest, and so all in all there seemed no real incentive to start the learning process all over again.

Which is to say, in a nutshell, that I was just too damned happy with the little rut I was in, and that I'd forgotten one of the basic rules not just of SCUBA but of everything else as well: that if you don't keep moving forwards, you don't really stay in one place, you move backwards - because the rest of the world moves on and leaves you in its wake.

Now, I dive almost exclusively to take photographs; I am literally and metaphorically focused on what I see once I hit the waterline. Seeing clearly is crucial to me; and, since I wear glasses topside, I long ago made sure that I had a prescription mask made so that I could see not only my subject but also the little dials and camera thingummies which always seem to have been made for people with eyes like a fly...

Here comes then what was, for me, a total surprise: BREATHING NITROX LETS ME SEE THINGS MORE CLEARLY, and I never would have believed it if I hadn't - well, seen it with my own eyes. The photographs reproduced here are a weak attempt to indicate the kind of difference that sucking good ole Nitrox has meant for me. What's really frightening is that now I look back and wonder how did I ever manage previously?

This is how it happened.

A few friends had mentioned that they'd be breathing Nitrox on a future trip to Scapa Flow, and that it might be an idea for me to consider doing the same, if only for the fact that I'd feel less fatigued after the day's dives and therefore more able to stand my round in the pub later on. (I didn't say they were great friends, did I?) So it was that Lesley Clark patiently disproved that old saying about old dogs and new tricks, putting up with the constant interruption of 'Yes, but what happens if -' and fighting back the entirely understandable urge to bite me. The Great Day dawned at last and we went to Stoney Cove, armed with cylinders that announced to the world that we were breathing precisely-measured percentages of nitrogen and oxygen, and in we went. Straight down to the hydrobox at 35 metres, and feeling strangely clear-headed in an environment I'd often dived before but this time without that wooly feeling that breathing air had always given me. This I had expected, and welcomed; what I wasn't prepared for was the sight of the box itself.

I'd seen it countless times, but I'd never seen it like this: it looked more colourful than I could ever recall it, almost reef-like, with differing shades of orange rust complimenting the darker patches of metal, and the whole structure apparently visible at a glance. Rivets stood out clearly

against welded edges; my torch played over the grating inside, and I could even read the scrawled graffiti on its walls. I swam in, under and round about it, sincerely amazed by the fact that a simple change of breathing gas could have so profound an effect merely by reducing the amount of nitrogen narcosis I'd always taken for granted. It was as if I'd been diving for years with a misted-up mask, and had only now got round to cleaning it. I was, in short, an instant convert - purely because I'd never realized that Nitrox could benefit my photography by keeping my brain a little less fogged than usual...

So, there you have it, a fully paid-up fan of what I'd always mocked as 'that devil gas', and a wiser man to boot. If you've already gone down this route, then you'll realize what I'm talking about, and if you haven't - well, what have you got to lose by trying it?

Words by Pat Morrissey

If you are interested in learning more about the benefits of Nitrox and/or taking a PADI or TDI course, please take a look at our [Technical Diving](#) page or call Ray or Lesley at the Dive Centre.

## Society News

Where does the time go? ..... I can't believe that we are almost two-thirds of the way through the year and already the end of another diving season is moving relentlessly closer. So far it has been a year of great achievements, not only for Adventure Divers but also for many of its Society members. We now have over **150 members** ... **WOW** ... lets just hope that you don't all turn up at Waltham Abbey pool for a swim next Wednesday!! Our website is also attracting a lot of attention, with hits now running at close to 100 per week. In terms of personal achievements, the following are all worthy of a special mention. Well done to Gary "Elvis" Liscoe who notched up 3,000 dives earlier this year ... [\(well done Gary, your buoyancy control is coming along nicely now ... Love Mum\)](#). Well done to Anthony "Tracker" Collins who completed and passed his PADI Assistant Instructor course with flying colours. Congratulations to James "Jellyfish" Spence who has completed his PADI Divemaster course and also achieved PADI's highest recreational ranking of Master Scuba Diver. Congratulations also to Rob Wetherall and Neil Gibbens who also both achieved the rank of Master Scuba Diver earlier this year ... [\(Divemaster course next boys ... you know it makes sense\)](#).

Finally, well done to Gillian Lucas who gained her Advanced Open Water and Dry Suit certifications on her 12th birthday!!