



**Scapa Flow
The Reconnaissance
6-13 July 2002**

[Trip Report Index](#)

A Non-CUUEG Trip Report by James Donnelly

Starring:

- From [Keighley, BSAC 117](#):
 - Neil "Ready..." Holdsworth
 - Mick "Steady..." Whitaker
 - Beccie "Mummy" Walkden
 - Greta "Huggies" Derrick
 - Phil "Blobless in Burra" Waterworth

- From **Cheadle, BSAC 1295**:
 - John "Tour Guide" Russell
 - "Dirty" Denica Kunica
 - Adrian "Merlin" Gidlow
 - Mark "Thunderbird 1" Hulland

- From [CUUEG, BSAC 52](#):
 - James "Harry Potter" Donnelly

Co-starring:

- "Big John" Thornton
- "Little John" Phillips
- Tom "Gimp Hood" Easop

Day-by day action:

- [Friday 5th](#)
- [Saturday 6th](#)
- [Sunday 7th](#)
- [Monday 8th](#)
- [Tuesday 9th](#)
- [Wednesday 10th](#)
- [Thursday 11th](#)
- [Friday 12th](#)
- [Saturday 13th](#)
- [Summary](#)

Quick dive index for the bored:

- [SMS Cöln](#)
- [Doyle](#)
- [SMS Dresden](#)
- [SMS Karlsruhe](#)
- [SMS Kronprinz Wilhelm](#)
- [U-116](#)
- [James Barrie](#)
- [Tabarka](#)
- [SMS Brummer](#)
- [F2 & Barge](#)
- [SMS Kronprinz Wilhelm \(take 2\)](#)
- [Gobernador Bories](#)



A happy bunch of divers



First, a word of explanation. Far be it from me to spurn CUUEG's great Scapa Flow trip to go up two weeks earlier with a bunch of complete strangers. However, the Clinical School in their infinite wisdom do not allow the first and second year medical students' summer holiday to happen at the same time. So the club trip that was just right for Iain was impossible for me. Then, with four weeks to my holiday and no diving planned, a miracle: a message from the Eastern Region list. Keighley SAC were short of divers for a trip to Scapa, in the first week of my holiday, and wanted Dive Leaders to dive on the scuttled German WW1 High Seas Fleet. It would have been a shame to let them down! All I needed now was to get my new backplate and wing assembled...

Friday 5th July

After spending all morning running around Cambridge with powertools, my new plate was ground, and I had all the bits I needed. No actual assembly yet though. Never mind, there was a rush hour out of Cambridge to beat - except that just this week they decided to start it at 2:30pm. After four hours on the road, I made it into Steeton, a little village west of Keighley, at 8pm. Up until this stage, I had only spoken to Beccie, the trip organiser, on the phone, and had no idea about any of the other divers I was to meet. At Beccie's house, I met up with Beccie and Greta, who was over from Singapore in the school holidays to do some diving with her friends. My jaunt from Cambridge suddenly seemed like nothing. After a very welcome pizza, I eschewed Big Brother to lay out webbing and hardware all over Beccie's kitchen floor, and began assembly... At midnight, with all the fittings at least on in the right order, I called it a night. Unfortunately, I would still be calling it night when I woke up.

Saturday 6th July

4:30 am. Whose idea of a joke was this? Oh yes, we had a ferry to catch... from the furthest corner of the British mainland. So up and on the road, Beccie co-driving my long-suffering car, and Phil arriving at 5 to take Greta and her kit. A grey and sometimes drizzly nine hours later, with a stop-over in Thurso to buy a soldering iron, we arrived in the car park at Scrabster, where Neil and Mick were waiting, having arrived, parked up and got the beers in some hours previously.

The plan was not to take our cars to Orkney, but leave them on the quayside at Scrabster and sail as foot passengers, with our kit in a pre-booked cargo container. There was still an hour before we had to load the container, so to everyone's amusement I suited up in the car park and went about adjusting the wing for size. Then, the Cheadle contingent having arrived, we piled everything we owned into a 6'x6'x6' steel box on wheels, said goodbye to the cars and boarded the St. Ola (every Orkney ferry since the 1800s having borne that name) for the 2 hour crossing to Stromness.

Arriving on the quayside, we found the helpful ferrymen had delivered our box straight to the boat, so we went and installed ourselves on the *MV Karin*. A converted trawler, she sleeps 8 in twin cabins and a room of 4 in her forward hold, plus a couple of tiny singles in the bow. Basic but functional, she has electricity when plugged in at night or when the compressor is running, and can supply clean air, nitrox or trimix on board. John Thornton, the skipper, explained to us which of the showers and toilets were working, and proposed a late start. Rejoicing, we grabbed fish and chips ("What's white pudding?"; "This can't be Scotland - there's no salt and sauce!") and mostly fell into bed, though not until I had applied the soldering iron to my webbing (and fingers!) and declared my wing diveable - in the nick of time...



The *MV Karin*, the liveaboard



Sunday 7th July

The late start to diving allowed us some time to get our kit assembled; it would stay set up all week, as the *Karin's* filling whips are long enough to reach all points on the deck. Over the first of the two inclusive breakfasts - toast and cereal before the first dive, full fry-up afterwards - we met Tom, a New York paramedic and rebreather-diving photographer. Tom spends several weeks a year in the Flow on John's boat, and is producing [a book](#) on the wrecks in English and German. He would spend the first four days taking advantage of the fact that our trip wasn't full by dropping in solo to take some photos of anything interesting he found.



Some faffing on deck...

SMS Cöln

We intended to start by diving the *Karlsruhe*, but as the wreck was busy, John brought us instead to the *Cöln*, a German light cruiser (150m, 5600 tons) lying on her starboard side in 35m. The light cruisers that remain are generally very intact, and you can pick your route round them. Diving with Phil, who would be my buddy for the week, we headed aft from the midships shot to take in the large deck guns at 30m. The largest bears a memorial plaque for a lost diver - a very immediate reminder of the potential perils of wreck diving. The *Cöln* has five guns and anchors at both bow and stern, plus companionways to explore and a fair amount of life, so this wreck was well worthy of being my 100th dive! (The wing, in spite of all my faffing - or perhaps because of it - behaved superbly.)

The Doyle

After a fry-up that was much more brunch than breakfast, we headed out to the *Doyle*, one of several steamers sunk as blockships in Burra Sound. These wrecks formed obstacles for attacking U-boats when Lyness was home to the British Grand Fleet. Today they remain in place, diveable at high or low water slack, as Burra Sound is very tidal. The *Doyle* sits upright in 17m of water, on a stony bed, so visibility is excellent. The hull is very intact and well populated with anemones, and forms a handy structure to hide behind if you arrive just ahead of slack water. The deck, meanwhile, is covered with stones and appears to be a kelp forest until you realise that the kelp is attached to steel. The fish are friendly, and clearly well used to divers feeding them - we obliged - and in the superstructure we found a stone jar and a green glass bottle buried in the stones on the deck. The 3m diameter propellor is in place, and at the bows the outer hull is open leading to some easy swim-throughs that form a network of passages, all within reach of the outside world. Around the bows, I was startled to see a lone

diver, face down on the bottom, with no bubbles emerging from his reg. However, closer inspection showed that it was no casualty, but Tom composing a shot! Leaving the wreck, we found that the current had begun to run, so we drifted off on delayed SMBs for our ascent.

Returning to Stromness, we ate at the Stromness Hotel, who serve Orkney ales in the lounge bar, provide a very good menu and only needed a few hours' notice to arrange a table for twelve!

Monday 8th July

SMS Dresden

Another late start, and another light cruiser in 35m, very similar to the *Cöln*, but this time lying on her port side. The shot lands towards the bows, where inspection of the deck between the anchor chains reveals the insignia of an eagle still visible: the emblem of the High Seas Fleet. Aft of the shot, the mainmast is very intact, with pulley-blocks for a halyard still attached. The midsection over the engine room has been extensively salvaged; most of the original wrecks were raised in the 1920s and 30s using compressed air, and those that remain have mostly sustained some damage. The *Dresden's* guns lie at the aft end, which meant that they weren't really accessible on air without going into deco, so we surfaced having seen about two thirds of the wreck. She has less life than the *Cöln*, but is still an excellent dive.

SMS Karlsruhe

The shallowest of the light cruisers, and hence the easiest, the most salvaged, and with the most life. She lies on her starboard side in 26m. The shot lies directly over the aft guns (two here and two at the bow), allowing the lads much posturing with a large object between their legs. Many fish inhabit this wreck, including some particularly friendly ballan wrasse expecting a meal of urchin every time they see divers. Astern is an area of more scattered wreckage, with some interesting crevices; forward of the first set of guns are a set of open deck hatches which would be easy to penetrate, and some smaller swim-throughs out on the hull. With more light and more life than the other cruisers, and still plenty of intact ship to look at, this is a very pretty dive, and probably my favourite of the trip.

Back in Stromness on Monday evening, we discovered the Early Bird Special at the Ferry Inn: 3 courses for £6.95. Their haggis in onion sauce in particular has to be tried. The Ferry is also the pub frequented by the crew of our liveaboard - always a good endorsement! After dinner (or "tea" if the Yorkshire contingent are reading this), I walked up the hill and found the 5 square metres of Stromness with Orange reception, where I was roundly scolded by our Diving Officer for forgetting which depth I needed permission to cross in CUUEG SDPs!



An interesting selection of kit...

Tuesday 9th July

SMS Kronprinz Wilhelm

The *Kronprinz* at 36m is the shallowest of the three battleships remaining in the Flow, the other two being the *König* and the *Markgraf*. They lie deeper than most of the other wrecks, and owing to the sheer weight of superstructure all turned turtle when they sank, so that the interesting parts of each wreck lie sandwiched in a few metres between the deckrail and the sea bed on one side of the wreck. Everything above this is smooth hull, except where salvage operations have broken it open, and the shotlines land on this upturned hull, so to find the superstructure you swim away from the keel plates and descend over the other side.

First impressions on diving any of the battleships are of sheer size. 175m long and displacing 25,000 tons, it is impossible to become familiar with them on a single dive. John, with his previous experience of diving this wreck (this was his 7th trip to Scapa), managed to find some of the guns, but our pair were just left with the scale of the wreck to contemplate. We dived up alongside the engine room, which has been broken open by salvagers, seeing the enormous turbine drive shafts inside, and made our ascent off the hull.

On returning to the boat, we were startled to see a pair of divers come up waving. Another dive boat who was closer than us steamed over, and discovered that it was Adrian and Mark. However, the crisis was over. At the end of their dive, they had been about to deploy a DSMB having made their ascent up the hull to 20m, when Mark felt the awful slipping sensation over his waist: his shotbelt had come off, and he watched it fall away down the side of the wreck to the bottom. Fortunately, he managed to grab onto Adrian before taking off vertically, and communicate what had happened, and with both of them dumping everything they could they came to a stop at 15m. Thereafter, they completed their stops normally, and made it back onto the boat, shaken and in Adrian's case extremely squeezed!

After the morning's dive, we put into Scapa port and took a taxi the couple of miles into Kirkwall to do some sightseeing, and more importantly souvenir shopping. Most of us spent some money in John Kemp's Drapers, who if you have the time to wait will embroider a personalised Scapa Flow logo onto your fleece/T-shirt/hat/underwear. Whilst I went off to look at the local history in the form of St. Magnus' Cathedral and the Earl's and Bishop's Palaces, the rest of the group were happy enough to lounge in the Cathedral grounds in the sun eating Orkney ice cream. On the way back down the hill to the taxis, I tried some, and had to admit it did have the edge on the local history!

U-116

The only diveable submarine wreck in Orkney, *U-116* sank in 1918. She was originally very intact, but in 1975 divers discovered that she sank with a live torpedo in one of her forward tubes. Royal Navy divers were called in to carry out a controlled explosion, but it turned out to be less controlled than they expected; all the other torpedoes in her torpedo room were detonated by the blast, scattering wreckage over a wide area.

No longer a recognisable submarine, the wreck of *U-116* sits on a flat silty bottom in 30m. Although Phil spent most of this dive searching in the silt for anything interesting that previous generations of divers might not have found, he searched in vain. I was content to drift around, inspecting the wreckage before it got stirred up! A fair amount of life inhabits the sub, mainly for lack of any other sea bed features in the vicinity, including cuckoo wrasse, conger eels, and the ubiquitous edible crabs. There are also a number of 2m-long cylindrical items with a snub nose at one end and a splayed cage at the other. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the first of these "torpedoes", but I later learned that they are the air cylinders that used to drive the ballast system. In the end, whether you like this wreck will depend how much you like poking around in wreckage that is no longer an obvious ship, and opinions in the group were divided.

A change of port for the evening: as we planned to dive the *James Barrie* the next morning, and slack would be early, we put in to Burray to save having to sail the whole length of the Flow and back. A fishing village, Burray is not large, but the pub boasts not only a pool table (where Mick soon demonstrated his expertise) and a jukebox (which John filled with hits of the 80s and early 90s), but also a pub table with two-player Space Invaders inset into the surface.

After supper, we walked down the beach to one of the Churchill Barriers, the great causeways of concrete blocks linking the islands that Winston had erected when it became clear that U-boats were getting past the blockships (to the detriment of HMS Royal Oak, sunk in 1939 and now a war grave.) The original blockships were barely moved to build the barriers, and as sand built up have become entombed in the beach, so you can "dive" the wrecks of the *Carron* and the *Collingdoc* without getting wet! Indeed, the *Collingdoc*'s concrete bridge seems to have found another use by the locals, judging by the buttock marks in the sand inside...!



The *Carron*.
Oops, I think we ran
aground!



The *Collingdoc*.
As much use as a
concrete boat.



Wednesday 10th July

The *James Barrie*

A 40m, 666-ton steam trawler sunk in 1969 and now lying on her starboard side in approx. 45m of water in Hoxa Sound off South Ronaldsay. Strong tides mean that the visibility on this wreck is always excellent in spite of the depth, and she makes a good introduction to deep wreck diving. Owing to the depth and the fact that I was diving a 15l cylinder of air, we got relatively little time on the wreck, but descended from the deckrail in 35m to the midline of the ship to investigate the wheelhouse. This is very intact, and makes a spooky sight by torchlight, filled with dozing fish. Countouring round over the roof, the aft hold gapes wide. Forward holds are also accessible. However, as the wreck must be dived at slack, which is not very long in Hoxa Sound, the shotline can (and did) become a little crowded on ascent, with a feeling of flags in the breeze. I intend to return to this wreck one day with a more suitable mixture and volume of gas!

After diving the *James Barrie*, we made our way up the Flow towards the *Tabarka*. However, we wanted to wait until the next slack water, so we had time to kill. We therefore stopped on the way at Lyness, formerly a Royal Navy dockyard and home to the Grand Fleet. Lyness now holds a highly recommended museum about the Orkneys in wartime, built inside the old steam pumping station whose machinery remains. Most of the exhibits concern the scuttled High Seas Fleet, with a comprehensive photographic history of their war record, scuttling and subsequent salvage, but there are also many exhibits of, or from, British ships based at Lyness. The "Oil Tank Exhibition" is also more promising than it sounds: a former huge storage tank now holds a collection of military vehicles, and a sound-and-light show projected onto the inside (unfortunately out of order the day we were there.)

The *Tabarka*

This was my first wreck penetration dive, and it's a good 'un. A 1909 steamer sunk as a blockship in Burra Sound in 1944, she lies upside down in 14m of water. We were dropped in up-tide with a fair amount of current still running, and given the advice to get inside the wreck for shelter, which we did via the open stern. The aft hold then opens up around you, with plenty of ambient light through small holes in the sides of the wreck between the hull beams, with room for a whole boatful of divers in one compartment if you're careful. The tidal water keeps the wreck swept clear of silt, so the whole ship is laid out for inspection, and once you get used to the inverted perspective you can start identifying parts of the still very intact machinery. The prop-shaft housing runs along the keel (above you), whilst the floor below is a mixture of decking and stones. Further forward, you swim past the engine machinery, pistons still recognisable, into the boiler room. The boilers are intact but have fallen to the bottom, with plenty of room to swim over or around. Further forward you come to an open section, followed by another overhang with what appear to be two levels, but chose not to explore this, instead taking another tour of the aft section of the ship.

However, this is not a wreck to hang around on; the tide quickly picks up whilst you're inside without you noticing, and we came up into a very stiff current, which made me more than a little nervous. In spite of our best efforts, Phil's DSMB set off at 45 degrees or more to the vertical, with us in hot pursuit, and we struggled our way up to 6m. However, as we arrived, we were swept above the *Doyle*, which lies adjacent, and the line caught on the wreck. In that current there was no choice but to let go, and leave the blob. An upcurrent then neatly popped us (and several other pairs) to the surface without a safety stop - a very good thing we were a long way clear of deco on this dive... Attempts to recover the blob, visible on the surface and straining at its line, were unsuccessful, and it had to be left to mark the *Doyle* until the change of tide or the arrival of a luckier set of divers!

Thursday 11th July

An early start today, as the skipper had to get back in time to go to the dentist. Also notable for being Phil's birthday, though he was as coy about the actual number as a maiden aunt...

SMS *Brummer*

This wreck completed our set of the light cruisers. 140m long and sitting on her starboard side in 36m, the *Brummer* is very intact, with several guns to be found. The shot led us straight down onto a gun hidden away between decks, but easy to find in the good vis. Heading left first, we passed a rear gun and found the stern anchor still in place, then turned and came back along the midline of the ship to the bows. The foredeck sports a large rotary gun, at a suitable angle for Phil to straddle in the classic pose of a male diver confronted with a long tubular object. However, a cursory medical examination of the barrel confirmed my worst fears - he had crabs! (Yes, all right. It's funnier at 30m.)

F2 and Barge

A pair of wrecks with a tale to tell. The *F2* was an experimental WW2 corvette who sank in 1946. In 1968, she was being salvaged by a barge, YC21, which had already retrieved and loaded her anti-aircraft guns. However, the gods of Orkney weather must have had the interests of future divers at heart, for a gale blew up and the barge too sank, all of 50m from the *F2* and still roped to her. The original rope has been replaced with a more permanent line, but otherwise they sit as they were in 17m, as a single excellent dive.

Both wrecks have a shotline, so you can choose where to start. We began on the barge, seeing not only the incongruous guns but also a workbench with a vice still attached inside. A ling was asleep under the hull, and the wrasse are clearly so used to being fed that if they see a diver and an urchin near each other they come and look at you, expecting the knife to come out. We then crossed to the *F2*, similarly populated with a wide variety of fish life; not only the usual ballan wrasse, but also many rainbow wrasse, a male cuckoo wrasse, and a large conger swimming round the end of the wreck. I spotted a scallop and teased it to make it swim, much to Phil's amusement; he took great delight in repeating the trick for a nearby buddy pair, although the scallop eventually got fed up and went from bunny-hops to the hedgehog curl-up-and-hope tactic. We left it, as one scallop wouldn't have gone far among ten divers, and there wasn't an R in the month.

The bow section of the *F2* lies on its port side, with some rather oversized gearwheels just aft. The anchor chain runs over the starboard side, and just behind it is a reasonably sized hole, but the back ends of Beccie and Greta were sticking out of it, so we gave it a miss. After bagging off from the top of the wreck, more as a good habit than from true necessity, I insisted on the full three minutes of Vyper safety stop, and we were well rewarded. When Phil's eyes nearly popped out and he started pointing frantically towards my waist area, at first I thought I must be losing my weightbelt. However, all became clear, as a seal appeared from just behind me, cruised round us on an inspection tour, and swam lazily off. A great end to a great dive.

We had planned to put in to Scapa and head into Kirkwall for a curry, but our plans were foiled by a tanker unloading at the Scapa oil terminal. Shockingly, this left our trip curryless, but we resolved to make up for it by playing an excessive amount of pool in the "Flattie" bar of the Stromness Hotel.

Friday 12th July

SMS Kronprinz Wilhelm (take 2)

We had been working up through the week to give us the option of diving the SMS Markgraf, the deepest and most inverted of the battleships. However, with all the interest tucked below the overhanging deck with the deckrail at 42m and the seabed at 50m, very few of us were up for that dive, so as a group we decided instead to return to the *Kronprinz*. A slight current led us to decide to take a similar route to our first dive on the wreck, so we didn't get to see the ship to the other side of the shotline, but I began to get much more of a feel of the scale of the wreck, especially when looking through portholes and hatches in the intact parts of the hull into gaping darkness. John, however, was on a mission for guns, and sure enough managed to find the 12" main armament, wedged between the deck and seabed. Mark, meanwhile, was on an even more determined mission for his missing weightbelt, so he and Adrian toured round to the boring side of the hull where they saw it vanish. Other divers with a keen eye had clearly been past, though; they found the shot pouches, but no belt. They did manage to retrieve all the original shot, which would have been some consolation to Mark - except that it was Adrian's shot in the first place! Meanwhile, Phil and I came back up the shotline, only to see an enormous lion's mane jellyfish blow straight across the line at 7m, leaving tendrils everywhere. Fortunately, we were already at our 6m stop, and so could watch this from above, rather than having to wade through the result.

The Gobernador Bories

Another of the Burra blockships, the *Gobernador* is an 1880s iron steamer sunk in 1915. She sits nearly upright in a field of kelp in 16-20m, the hull very intact but the decking mostly collapsed with a few swim-throughs. Again, as with all the shallower wrecks, the wrasse are as tame as pigeons in Trafalgar Square, and we also saw a cod under the hull at the start of the dive. The large prop and rudder are in place, and well worth a visit, and several pairs swam through or round a large shoal of coley on ascent, a new experience for most. On the whole, this was a very peaceful dive - no current until right at the end, no extreme depth, little if any penetration, but lots of colourful life in excellent vis. I found it a good dive to unwind after a week that had stretched my experience as a diver. Except that at the very end of the dive, the Delayed SMB Curse of Burra Sound struck twice more. Firstly, my reel jammed on deployment, and I had to let go and recover it from the boat (fortunately achieved without trouble.) Then Adrian deployed his reel, which unreeled to the required length and promptly fell apart. Fortunately, he and Mark managed to keep hold of the line, and use it as a shot to ascend, following which they could pull up the line with most of the mechanism still attached.

After all that, it was time to head back to Stromness and pack. After a small disagreement with the skipper which probably had as much to do with empty stomachs as anything else, we were persuaded to load the shipping container early, and then headed over to the Stromness Hotel for one last slap-up meal, where I introduced the team to the joys of deciding nicknames for CUUEG trip reports. Much back-stabbing ensued, but in the open and in the best of spirits. Freed from the need to be hangover-free the next morning, those male divers who ventured out discovered that the Stromness Ladies' hockey team were having a benefit night in all the major pubs in full hockey gear, and one member of the crew became very well acquainted with the attractions of Orkney...



Travelling light as usual.



Saturday 13th July

Although some of us were cursing the bright sunlight this morning, as the ferry pulled away from Stromness you couldn't help but admire the views it provided. Even the hospital looked less ugly, and the man standing in the water next to his boat on the other side of the harbour seemed captivated, by something. As we sailed into Scrabster, the traditional Divers' Curse of Faff struck one last time, as our attempt to assemble on deck for a group photo ended up with two groups at opposite ends of the ship! Finally, our kit eventually rescued from the trusty box, we said our goodbyes and set off to hack it back south. We knew we would meet again soon. We did. In a service station just north of the border.



Looks quite pretty in the sunlight.

Summary

Summery? In Orkney? Yes, amazingly. Kirkwall was the sunniest place in Britain that week, which made the front page of the Telegraph, never mind the Orcadian. The diving was excellent, but challenging; this trip certainly made me much more aware of my limits as a diver, and what I'll need to do before extending them further. Whatever our quibbles with the boat, the whole exercise ran pretty smoothly - thanks to much hard work by Beccie - and was a good advert for going diving with other clubs. I'll certainly be happy to dive with Keighley or Cheadle again any time. Maldives next year, anyone?
