



Portland 3rd-4th April 2004

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Trip Report by Iain Smith

Readers are warned that this trip was something of a disaster due to weather, with only one very low viz dive taking place. Those interested in what we actually did with ourselves are invited to read on. Otherwise you may wish to stop reading now.

Divers:

- John Kendall
- David Martin
- Iain Smith

As a trip planned further in advance than most short trips, we had high hopes of this weekend. Our gas supply came though on time, the new oxygen kit arrived and John managed to borrow a van. Despite David being excluded from the driving for not having a licence to drive 7.5 tonne HGVs and Iain having to fill in tachograph disks for the first time in his life, John still insists that it was a van!

[Van picture to follow]

Inevitably, though, things started to go wrong before we left Cambridge, with Iain discovering that his oxygen analyser was on strike. Unfortunately, attacking it with a soldering iron served no purpose beyond delaying our departure by an hour.

This, in turn, created problems when we arrived at the Aqua Hotel. Despite having phoned to warn them that we were going to be late, the evening staff had no idea who we were or why we were there, the message having clearly not been passed! Fortunately the barmaid was extremely helpful and managed to find enough paperwork to confirm that we did have the room booked and, possibly more importantly, that the key hadn't been given to anyone else! A big, "Thank you!" to her.

Our next omission was to have forgotten to book the weather. With south-westerlies blowing, our planned 34m dive on the *Frognor* was replaced with a dive on the *Bennindijk*, in 28m.

Then our dive boat changed. Having been expecting to dive off *Top Gun*, Breakwater's turbocharged Offshore 105, we were a little surprised to see our boat listed as, *Protector* - a RIB not previously noted to work from Breakwater. Apparently *Top Gun's* new engines had been sucking in seawater and, while she had been due back in the water the week before, the spare parts had arrived late and she was still in overhaul.

Given that we were each planning to carry five tanks on dives later in the weekend, the idea of having to get off and back onto a RIB did not go down particularly well. This changed a little when we actually set eyes on *Protector*.

While she is technically a RIB, *Protector* is a RIB with a difference. For a start, she has a tail-lift, which always goes down well with technical divers. Then there are the kit racks and seats - enough to accommodate six technical divers or ten recreational divers or more if people are prepared to squeeze up and/or put kit on the floor - and the wheelhouse (with its head) in which one can hide from the spray. Best of all is the skipper, Ivor, who welcomes you back onto the boat with your choice of hot drink.

Perhaps most impressive was the boat brief, where after the usual safety instructions, Ivor asked, "OK, other than me, are there any oxygen administrators on the boat?" - this being the first time that any of us could recall being asked such a question by a skipper.

The ride out was rather, "lumpy" and more than one of the divers on the boat were looking a little green by the time that we arrived on site.

The skipper dropped us on slack, and we were able to make an almost vertical drop onto the wreck. Unfortunately, the visibility was inversely proportional to the depth and by the time we reached the bottom, visibility was a metre at best. While there were various pieces of metal there, it is difficult to know exactly where we were or what we were seeing. Not only were we hampered by the appalling visibility, but John's seasickness had not resolved. Despite being at almost 30m, the groundswell was still throwing us around. To add to problems, Iain seemed completely unable to control his buoyancy - a matter of no small embarrassment to him. This left David trying to keep track of one buddy who seemed intent on drifting upwards and another who was less focussed than normal.

With no clear idea of where we were or how the wreck lay, we meandered around, hoping to find something recognisable. Communication and keeping track of each other was fairly simple - the benefits of powerful lights again being obvious - although the low visibility did result in some confusing moments when twinsetted divers from other boats swam through the middle of our group. At first glance, one was never quite sure whether it was someone else or whether it was one of our team having suffered a primary light failure. Principle recognition features in this situation were the presence or absence of 3" high lettering on the side of the tanks and the location of two other glowing balls

of light in the vicinity.

At about 15 minutes into the dive, Iain finally realised that the reason he was having to repeatedly vent his wing might be because it was continually filling. Sure enough, holding his inflator to his ear, he could hear a slight hiss. Disconnecting the feed, he closed up with John and David to call the dive, arriving just as John thumbed it himself, feeling too ill to continue.

Deployment of DSMBs showed clearly that this was the first deep dive of the season, however from the 21m gas switch onwards, the ascent was rather more respectable with the team actually starting to communicate and function properly.

Once back on the boat, we found that the other three divers on the boat had had an even less successful dive than had we, having had to abort on arrival on the wreck due to a freeflow. However, we didn't seem to be making any move to return to Portland. We then noticed that there was a DSMB next to our boat. Which was strange, as we certainly had all of our divers back on the boat. Apparently this was a diver from another boat...whose buddies had been back on their boat for some time. "He's quite alright," said Ivor. "There's a continuous stream of bubbles." After a momentary, horror-filled pause, we realised that he meant exhaled gas, rather than a leak!

After discussion with the other boat, it was realised that no-one knew what deco the diver still had to do, how much gas he had, nor why they had been separated. As the diver closest to his kit, Iain kitted back up and dropped over the side to find out if the diver was alright, the need to confirm the safety of the diver taking priority over the need to get two divers into the water. A strict deadline to get another DSMB to the surface to indicate "All is well," was agreed, which, if it were passed, would result in contingency plans being put into action.

Iain was met at around 6m with furious gesticulations, some of which seemed to refer to the other diver's computer, some of which seemed to refer to his buddies, "up there," interspersed with a sign which Iain was fairly certain did not mean the number "two"!

However, the diver was OK, had adequate gas so, having released a DSMB as arranged, Iain merely sat with him as his computer counted down.

Time on the surface passed slowly, and in marked contrast to rescue scenarios devised by various club members in recent years there was little for the surface cover to do other than plan for complications. Nine minutes later, Iain surfaced with the other diver, without further incident, rendering David's contingency planning redundant.

It transpired that having planned an air dive with accelerated deco in order to match his buddies' nitrox profiles, a buoyancy moment had caused his automatic gas switching dive computer to revert to air mode and ignore the gases actually being breathed. This led to a discussion of the merits of pre-planned deco profiles in wetnotes.

Having returned to port, we found that, due to the rising winds, our 38m afternoon dive on the submarine A3 was off, being replaced with a harbour dive. As the *HMS Hood* is the only harbour dive that we had not previously explored from top-to-bottom - indeed on our last dive, we found new areas to investigate - she would have been the only dive of interest. Unfortunately, due to Portland Port's highly questionable decision to ban diving on the *HMS Hood* on safety grounds ("She's collapsing" - yes, of course she's collapsing! She's been rusting at the bottom of the south shipping channel for the better part of a century. But so has the remains of the High Seas Fleet in Scapa, but no-one's talking about banning diving on them!) that dive was not an option.

Instead, given the convenient proximity of Underwater Explorers, we indulged in a healthy dose of retail therapy. Healthy, that is, for UE's business account!

Having a "diving afternoon" free provided the opportunity to fix many of the little "niggles" that one finds with kit - not serious enough to do anything about immediately after the dive, then completely forgotten about until the next dive. Hence the back of the van rapidly became a combined blending station and kit workshop.

However, even for fully committed kit geeks, playing with spanners and cable-ties can only seem interesting for a finite period of time, so we headed into Weymouth for a film and some food before returning to write up dive logs and to make a start on some of the backlog of outstanding trip reports.

The following morning saw us blown out once again. In a spirit of optimism, we planned and booked two further weekend's diving for later in the season, then set off on the long road home after one of the least successful trips in the history of CUUEG.