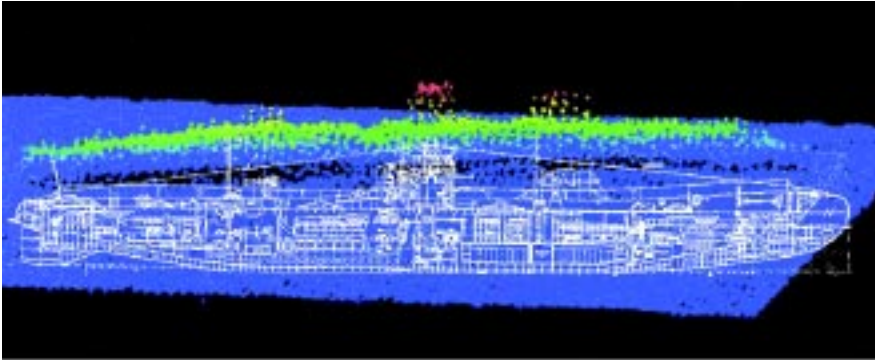


Submerged In History



When MV Karin's
John Thornton
emailed Alex Gallego
to tell him of a
planned dive on two
newly discovered
Scapa wrecks there
was only one
response ...

LAST SUMMER I received an email from John Thornton, skipper of *MV Karin*, announcing plans for diving on a couple of recently discovered U-boat wrecks in waters east of Orkney in 2008. It did sound interesting so I put my name down for the trip and pretty-much forgot about it until late spring, when I got in touch with John to find out if it was still going ahead. It was, so on August 16 I made my way up to Orkney, with only a vague idea of what the plans were, and joined six other divers for a week on a busy *Karin*.

The first couple of days were quite breezy, with winds from the north east, so we spent them diving some of the usual German High Seas Fleet wrecks in Scapa Flow (*Markgraf* and *Koeln* on Sunday; *Kronprinz Wilhelm* and *Brummer* on Monday). A good start just to get us into the swing of things.

On the Tuesday we dived on *HMS Pheasant*, sunk in 1917, which I had dived twice before. This is a nice dive but deep (80m, give or take) and very tidal, with short and unpredictable slack water (my previous record was 2 out of 4 attempts). However, this time the shot was within sight of the stern and the current on the bottom was manageable, although the shot was humming with the tide on the way up, until we released the deco station. Visibility was good and this bode well for future dives, which would be further offshore.

The following day we dived the *Zarefah*, a relatively shallow wreck at just over 40 m. This was a luxury yacht commissioned as a minesweeper, which sank after hitting a mine in 1917. It reminded me a bit of the *Verona*, in the Moray Firth. This dive resulted in a further reduction of our complement, since one of the divers had a problem on

ascent, which resulted in her being taken to Kirkwall by lifeboat, together with her buddy. Fortunately it turned out not to be too serious. Then we went into Stronsay overnight, ready for diving one of the U-boats on the Thursday.

These wrecks were discovered in 2006 during a hydrographic survey carried out by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. Research of relevant sinkings in the area narrowed them down to U102 and U92, which went down in 1918. They lie relatively close together, some 20 miles offshore in 80 m of fairly tidal waters.

Although the wrecks are quite far offshore, we left harbour quite late the following day (around 10.30am), because the plan was to dive the U92 (not sure how they know which is which) on the afternoon slack, which John reckoned would be around 3 or 3.30pm. We were on site in good time and the shotline went in ... only to disappear from sight. The line must have got tangled on the way down and the heavy shot dragged the buoys down.

A new shotline was got ready but this time we waited (and waited!) before it went in until the 3.5 kn. current started to subside. At that point, we were told to start getting kitted up. Half way through, John said he thought the tide was picking up again (we stopped!) but to carry on and he would decide in a couple of minutes (we hurried!). Fortunately, it seemed ok so in we went, at 5.20pm. Just a bit later than planned.

As I made my way down the shotline, I could see the lights of the divers already on the

wreck. I let go of the line on sight of the bottom and looked up. First, it seemed as if there were bits of submarine sitting on rocks but I soon realised those were no rocks but the entire hull of the submarine (with 10:50 trimix diluent on my rebreather I was not narked, I promise!).

It took me a few moments to take in the sight in front of me: a mostly intact submarine sitting upright and proud on the seabed. The shot had landed on top of the wreck itself, on port side, just aft of the conning tower. I had decided that my planned 20 minutes bottom time would give me enough time to swim the full length of the sub, so I set off along the starboard side towards the bow.

The wreck is very intact by the conning tower section, although further along some sections of the outer hull have peeled away. The diameter of the wreck was greatly reduced towards the bow, where – in my very limited knowledge of submarines – I would say that the torpedo

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MV Karin

tubes had been blown away, maybe as a result of the collision with the mine that sunk it.

There was also a fishing net with some floats wrapped around the bow and over some of the forward gun ammunition but it was easy to spot and did not pose a danger to divers in the 10+ m visibility we had.

I circled the bow and swam towards the stern along the port side, pausing to examine the forward gun with its ammunition still neatly piled on deck. I got to the stern and swam round it, although I did not look for the propeller because at the time I thought that was the bow (it had not occurred to me that the stern of a submarine is a bit more 'pointy' than that of a surface boat - oops!).

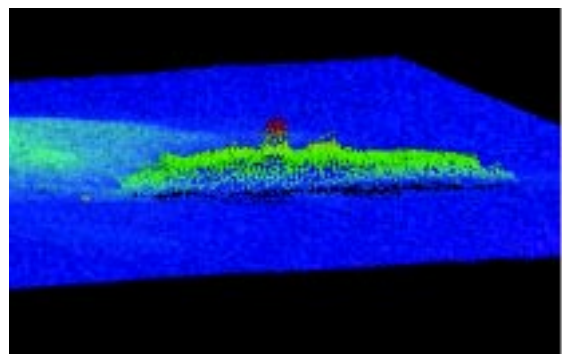
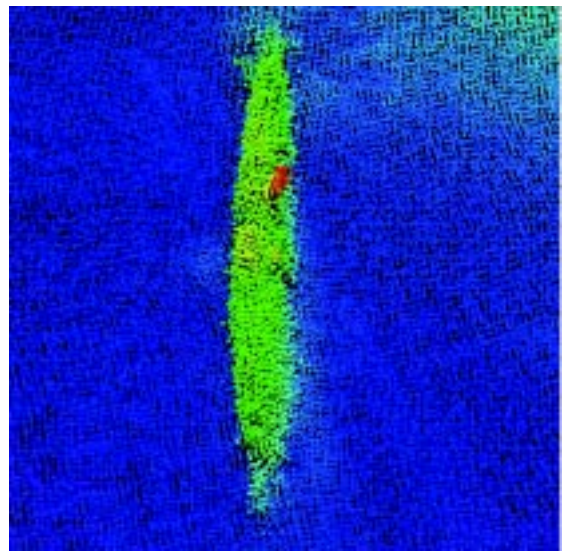
I then rose onto the top of the hull, where I had a good look at the stern gun. There, the ammunition was slightly more scattered on the deck and the surrounding seabed but still abundant and clearly identifiable.

Just aft of the conning tower there was a hole in the hull, some 3m in diameter, and peeking inside it was possible to see a few big gauges, with the marking inside them still readable. Another diver said that it was possible to see into the stern

section of the submarine from that break in the hull. From there, I still had some time to swim around the conning tower, which was perfectly intact, before reaching for the shotline for the start of some 90 min deco.

Something to break the monotony was the appearance of a grey seal, which came within 1m of two divers on their 18m stop, just below me. It had a look, pirouetted behind them and disappeared (nobody else saw it!). I would have thought it could find its dinner somewhere easier than on a wreck in 80m, 20 miles offshore, unless it was there for the fun out it!

We were all on a high when we got back onboard because we had just been on a very special dive, not only for its historic significance and its relative exclusivity, but also because it was a very good dive! We still managed another dive that trip (some small freighter in just over 60m the following day; could it be the *Remus*?) but it is not surprising that most dives would be a bit of an anticlimax straight after U-92 (the lobster I got was a small consolation). However, looking on the bright side, John has dates for a few trips in 2009 so I will just have to find the time for a second visit.



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