

Peering Into The Abyss

Rod MacDonald, the well known diver and author is speaking at the Scottish Dive Conference in Eyemouth next month. Rod's subject will of course be shipwrecks, however as a taster of his style we are printing an abridged chapter from his book *The Abyss*, where he describes a unique dive. A dive that finds him far outside his comfort zone and requires all the discipline and experience picked up throughout his diving career.

THE CORRYVRECKAN Whirlpool is the stuff of legends. As a child I grew up hearing tales of boats and ships being caught in it and sucked down with their unfortunate sailors into the depths of the monster. Although my imagination ran wild I never really knew where it was then. As my involvement with the sea grew throughout my diving career, I became more aware of it. I never dreamt however for one moment in all that time that I would dive down into the heart of the Whirlpool itself.

The Gulf of Corryvreckan is a small channel of water just over half a mile wide that separates the Isle of Jura from the smaller island of Scarba on the west coast of Scotland, south of Oban. It is perhaps the most feared strip of water on the British coast. When the whirlpool is in full motion, the half-mile wide channel is a very dangerous place to be. Tales abound of boats and ships being caught in it and sucked down into oblivion. Such is its danger that the Royal Navy has classed the channel as unnavigable and the lifeboat has been called out to over 50 emergencies there in recent years. Currents can reach 16 knots and its roar can be heard 10 miles away. Standing waves 10 feet high breaking endlessly reveal that there is some massive obstruction on the seabed. It seems as though the whole of the Atlantic tries to funnel through this small half-mile wide channel, pushing colossal amounts of water towards the Sound of Jura. This tidal action has scoured out a massive chasm in the Gulf more than 200 metres deep. In the middle of this chasm, trying to block the might of the Atlantic, stands a Pinnacle of solid rock which reaches up to just 30 metres short

of the surface. The top of the Pinnacle is about 100 feet wide and it widens as it drops down towards the bottom of the chasm 200 metres below. The standing waves visible on the surface are caused as the onrushing tide is forced up and over the pinnacle before dropping instantly back down into the chasm. An underwater waterfall is created with fierce down currents. Scientists have been keen to study the Pinnacle but have been denied permission to dive under HSE regulations because of the great depths, the great currents and associated mayhem.

But we as sport divers were not bound by those rules. So, when an Edinburgh TV director who had trained Ewan to dive in his early days, wanted a team of experienced divers to dive the pinnacle for an Equinox documentary, Maelstrom, part of the Lethal Seas series in 2000, Ewan got the call. Ewan was very quickly on the phone to me asking if I'd be interested. My initial reaction was that this was a crazy thing to do - but he persisted and eventually I agreed. Very shortly after that I found myself arriving at Oban on a Saturday morning to meet a team led by experienced trimix diver Graeme Bruce, which was made up of Ewan, myself, Jim Burke, Dave Hadden, David Ainsley and Jack Morrison.

The night before the dive we headed down to a small pub at the Bridge over the Atlantic, a small bridge that connects the mainland to a small island and so bridges the Atlantic. We had agreed to meet there to conduct the briefing for the next day's dive into the Whirlpool - and the ever-present TV director would be there to film. As we went into the pub we found that the locals had been ush-

ered along to one end of the bar to make way for a number of bright TV lights on stands. They eyed us quizzically as we entered. David gave us the briefing for the dive and the latest weather forecast - it wasn't looking good. The wind was already gusting strongly and a Force 8 was now expected the next day, which might well put paid to the dive on the Whirlpool. Nevertheless, although there was a real chance that the dive would be off, we still went through the motions of the dive briefing for the TV camera.

"The moment the ebb starts, the down currents start. What we need to do is get in on the end of the flood. It's likely to be hard work getting down the shot line - there is no getting away from that."

Awaking on the day of the dive, I was immediately struck by the noise of the wind whipping around our accommodation. Getting up and throwing on some warm clothes I went outside - to be joined by Ewan. The force of the wind buffeted us and we both looked at each other and agreed that the dive would most probably be off.

After breakfast we collected our gear from our room and made the short drive down to the harbour. There, all the divers were arriving and loading their gear into the *Porpoise*. The wind howled about and I was by this stage absolutely convinced that the dive would be called off. I suspected that we were just not being told as yet so that the TV director could film the actual disappointment (or relief) on our faces as the announcement was made on the quayside. Nevertheless I loaded my gear into the boat and got changed in the lee of a fishhouse block into my warm diving undersuit.

Once all the kit and divers were aboard

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we were filmed as the *Porpoise* cast off and we headed out to open water. David explained that because of the lie of the surrounding islands he could find shelter and run all the way to the Gulf without getting into the stormy weather which would be found in exposed waters. After being convinced in my own mind for the last 12 hours that the dive was not going ahead, I had to come to terms with the fact that, after all, I was now about to be pitched into the heart of the Corryvreckan Whirlpool. Perhaps it was just as well it turned out like that - at least I had slept well the night before.

At first there was a lot of nervous gallows humour as we headed out across the Sound of Jura. The divers busied themselves setting up their dive gear and doing the usual round of kit checks. It was in the back of all of our minds that if the downcurrents got hold of us, we could be pulled quite some distance down the side of the Pinnacle. The absolute, maximum recommended depth for air diving is 50 metres. The depth to the bottom of the Pinnacle was 200 metres. If we were to dive it on compressed air - and got pulled down the side of the Pinnacle to such great depths, the very air we breathed would become toxic and kill us. As a result I chose to dive using TDI's Trimix B, a mixture of 16% oxygen, 45% helium and 39% nitrogen. This would allow me to survive being pulled down to about 100 metres or even more.

Ewan was going a step further still. He had rigged his much-cherished Buddy Inspiration Closed Circuit Rebreather, now known as Kato, with an even higher helium mixture, which would allow him if necessary to be swept to the bottom of the Pinnacle at 200 metres - and survive. No one was intending going below 50-60 metres - but it was comforting to know that if the worst came to the worst, and things went wrong, Ewan could actually stand at the bottom of the Pinnacle, look up and at least witness the rest of us casting off this mortal coil.

As we arrived in the Gulf of Corryvreckan everyone on the boat fell silent. The gallows humour petered out - an apprehensive and nervous silence enveloped the *Porpoise*. This was a special place - one of the most foreboding and eerie places I have been in my life. The Gulf simply seemed filled with doom, broken only by the cries of a few seagulls. We could see the much-fabled standing waves marking the spot where the Pinnacle stood, hidden in the depths.

Once all the divers were prepped the first two took their position on the gunwales of the boat. David came out and

gave us a final briefing on the conditions and how the dive had to be run. He told us that the tide was dropping away now towards slack water - but that that period of slack water would only last for 10 minutes. After that the tide would pick up fiercely in the opposite direction and it was time to get away and start the ascent. Ominously, we were told that when our bubbles started going downwards we should get the hell out of there - as the current would be escalating dramatically. Finally, David added a sobering warning: "Conditions today are not ideal - no one is forced to go in on this dive. There is no pressure on anybody to do so." But we were all now committed and psyched up for the dive. There was no going back.

The first two divers rolled backwards into the water on David's signal, righted themselves and grabbed hold of the shot line as they drifted with the current. A quick round of OK signals to each other and the boat and they slipped under the water to start the descent to the Pinnacle. Once they had cleared the buoys I sat on the gunwale and Dave Hadden clumped down beside me. David gave the signal that we were in position again and, heart racing, Dave and I rolled over backwards into the water a few feet below. As the usual explosion of white water and bubbles disappeared, I righted myself and looked down current searching for the buoys and line. All my earlier fears and foreboding had disappeared. I was preoccupied with the mechanics of the dive, of getting to the shot line and not missing it. Sure enough, I could see the shot leading down from the buoys into the abyss. The underwater visibility looked good - at least 25 metres and I could see the bubble streams rising up from the two divers ahead of and below us.

It took Dave and I just a few minutes to haul our way down to the top of the Pinnacle. Initially I thought the Pinnacle was devoid of life, seemingly scoured clean by the current. On closer examination however, I could see that there was a fine mat of tiny organisms, noticeably smaller than their counterparts elsewhere in Scottish waters. Larger specimens are perhaps swept away by the current - or perhaps they have just evolved smaller to survive. Large smooth potholes peppered the surface of the Pinnacle here and there where small stones had lodged and were then remorselessly ground round and round by the currents. Over a period of time these small stones had carved out these 6-foot deep potholes. Dave and I circumnavigated the Pinnacle at a depth of about 45 metres. We then headed up as planned to its top, conscious of trying to avoid spending too long at depth which would rack up lengthy decompression stops for the ascent.

We were keeping a careful eye on our dive computers and could see the min-

utes ticking away. In the glorious 25-metre visibility all the divers gradually collected on the top of the Pinnacle. Once there I noticed a change in the direction of the current. It was as if someone had thrown a big switch. One minute the tide was dropping off gently in one direction. The next minute you could feel it starting to pick up rapidly in the other direction. There are titanic forces at work here. All marine life seemed to pass away from the Pinnacle - the all too brief moment of calm had passed and the residents of the Pinnacle were preparing themselves for the next six hours in the maelstrom. If the locals were getting worried, our team of six divers should be getting out of there. Dave and I however couldn't resist the temptation to fin over to the edge of the Pinnacle and look down over the side - down into the 200 metre deep abyss.

As we peered over the side of the Pinnacle I suddenly became aware that my exhaled bubbles had stopped going upwards. With the next exhaled breath my bubbles started to go slowly downwards over the side of the Pinnacle. As I continued to breath out my bubbles started going downwards more and more vigorously. It was a very surreal experience - it was certainly time to get out of this dangerous place.

I looked at Dave and gave the thumbs 'up' signal - returned with an OK signal from Dave. We prepared ourselves by pumping gas into our suits and wings until we were almost positively buoyant. We then each inflated our lifting bags and let go of the bags. Our reels spun and chattered as they paid out the strong thin line as the bags sped up to the surface. As I stepped off the top of the Pinnacle it was as though a thousand invisible hands were clutching at my legs and trying to pull me down. It was quite an unsettling feeling and initially I had to work hard to make headway upwards.

The task of managing the ascent however soon absorbed me as I wound in my reel, winching myself up towards the surface. Once I got 10 metres up from the top of the Pinnacle the water settled down and we were just into a regular free hanging ascent on our bags.

As we broke the surface and clambered back into the safety of the *Porpoise* a sense of euphoria overwhelmed all of us. There was much manly banter and slapping of backs - a complete contrast to the silent mood that had overcome the party before the dive. We had successfully carried out perhaps the most challenging dive in British waters into one of the last great unexplored habitats on earth. But we all realised that it had gone so smoothly largely due to the professionalism and know how of David Ainsley and the team leader Graeme Bruce. They had made a potentially terrifying dive manageable.

We had stood on the Pinnacle and peered Into the Abyss.