

Course Report: Advanced Wreck Diver, 30th April & 3rd May 2010

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As an instructor you are always looking for ways to improve the courses you teach and I think I may have found one – run line laying workshops in the dark. Now I know that sounds strange, but students doing line laying practice on land during the day always forget one important factor, when they do it for real underwater in the overhead environment it is usually dark and therefore as well as the reel they will also have a torch in their hands. I know it doesn't sound like much, but just like the tale about the straw and the camel's back there is always a tipping point and having taught a lot of these courses the light always proves a far bigger problem than

students anticipate. That said there is one slight downside to my plan – the students can't always see what I'm doing.... I will have to think on it some more.

We had arranged to do a 1-on-1 course with Hemi from Dive Tutukaka at very short notice. Unfortunately he's heading back to Malta with no plans to return to NZ and as Malta is surrounded by some excellent wreck diving opportunities he wanted to do this course before he went. As we were already planning on diving up at Tutukaka on the weekend we seized the chance to squeeze the course into our schedule. Besides, given how much diving Hemi has done I expected him to be very well prepared – which is great because it allows me to cause as many problems as possible, which you know I enjoy.

The first big dive of the course is the lost line drill, which I normally conduct in the hanger. Having been a Dive!Tutukaka staff member for 5 years this is an area that Hemi thought he was very familiar with – so of course I didn't disillusion him. Once he swapped to the blacked out mask I moved him to one side of the hanger and then watched as he deployed his spool and started his search for the mainline. Very quickly it was clear that the 'very familiar' hanger wasn't really that familiar and actually contains far more moving parts, lines, brackets, shelves and doorways than Hemi had noticed on previous dives. However, as an experienced professional he methodically continued his search and after 15 minutes successfully tied into the mainline and exited. So what did he learn on that dive? "The next time I'm in that hanger I will be having a much better look around!" (Apologies for the uninspiring picture, but that's what the hanger looks like after all the silt has been stirred up.)



The next couple of dives are where we practice line laying inside the wreck, followed by a blind line exit and an air sharing exit. As Hemi was on double tanks I extended the line a little further than normal to give him more practice at both the line laying and the exits. I think he was pleased that he was getting a good workout – at least he seemed to be smiling by the end. The blind line exit is always fun as this is where you realise which of your tie-offs are good ones and which are bad. This was no different for Hemi, who discovered that a line that meanders from one side of the passage to another generally leads to lots of bashing into walls on the exit. As his buddy on the air sharing exit I also showed him how the out of air diver can make it easy or hard on the person behind. Getting low in the corridor and using your hands to pull yourself along makes life easy – stay

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high and use your fins lots and your buddy (and only air supply) gets kicked in the face. It's your choice where you position yourself – but then it's also your buddy's choice about providing you with air.....



The final dive of the course is the mission dive, where the team chooses and plans a route they wish to take through the wreck and then tries to execute the plan. Of course having dived the wreck lots of times before Hemi knows it better than most, so I selected the route we would follow – in through the hanger, into the torpedo bay, drop down the shaft to the engine room, through the hatch to the boiler room and out via the starboard side. Yes I know it sounds like a long distance, but it's actually a great route to use because along the way there are lots of exits out of the wreck that you can use if necessary.

Funnily enough what I had forgotten is that although Hemi dives the wreck quite often it is usually with customers that do not want to go into the lower deck areas so he wasn't as familiar with these as I expected. And joy of joys (for me as instructor at least) he even managed to get a bit lost – enough to cause himself difficulty laying the line. A perfect learning experience!

Overall what did we learn? Firstly that visibility can change massively from week to week. When we dived the wreck the previous week I could see the wreck from our safety stop at 6m – during this course I couldn't even see one side of the hanger doorway from the other. Secondly that even if you think you know a wreck well do you really know it properly. The world seems a very different place when you lose vision temporarily. Finally the same thing that I say on every course – you need to practice practice practice if you want to be proficient! Unfortunately there are no short cuts to gaining skills and experience.

And of course I can't end a report without thanking Kev at OceanBlue for letting us use Mazurka. There's nothing like a hot pie straight after a dive to keep you going.