

Course Report: PADI Advanced Wreck, 13-14th March 2010

Jamie Obern

Advanced wreck diving involving penetration into the overhead environment is a serious business. You need the right gear, the right training and plenty of dives to build your experience. However, just because the diving is serious that doesn't mean the training cannot be fun – in some cases hilarious, although not always for the reasons you would expect. Take the following example: How do you explain to your elderly neighbour that you are not the director of a local drama group running rehearsals; that the grown men who appeared to be acting like comedy elephants in a pantomime were in fact practicing line laying techniques for advanced wreck penetration? Yes that's exactly what happened to me the day after I had the latest class practicing their line laying techniques in my garden.



This course had four students on it – lots of work for me as the instructor, but no real surprise given that our next Lermontov trip is fast approaching. The only real problem was that whilst Aidan, Peter and Dean all wanted to know as much about the Lermontov as possible, poor Aaron had to listen to us all going on and on, hoping he can get some time off work for the next trip. I did try not to talk too much about the trip, but when you've got deck plans, a DVD of the salvage, lots of stories to tell and a willing audience it is easy to get side-tracked - apologies Aaron.

As usual our first evening was all theory and our second evening was based at the lake, where we practiced line laying and the other team protocols we would be using at the weekend. I split the group into two teams and explained the dives. Dive 1: Follow the line course I laid, practice touch contact and do the line course twice, once in front and once behind. Dive 2: lay a line course as a team and then recover the line. Standing on the shore everything seems so simple – but as usual once underwater things always change a bit.

Not wanting to ruin the surprise for future students, I'll just highlight a couple of the typical things I always see as an instructor. Firstly during the blind line follow everyone is always very rough with the line – using it to drag themselves along and hold themselves down to control their buoyancy – rather than using it merely as a guide to direction and depth. Inevitably the line pulls off most of the tie offs, becomes slack and shortly after that chaos ensues. It was no different for this team. Dive 2 is equally instructive: Dean laid the line first and seemed determined to do it in record time, finning off at 100kph. What about the team, Dean? And Aaron – determined to tie off on the awkward round rock, rather than the perfectly placed metal ring 30cm to your left – maybe a bit too task focussed? I'm not trying to pick on Dean and Aaron, everyone made mistakes, these are just very common problems at the start of all courses. However, there was also a new problem, although this was an instructor one rather than a student one – I hadn't checked my new dry-suit neck seal for size and spent most of the dive worrying about blacking out due to the pressure on my carotid artery!

With the theory and shallow water practice complete the second part of the course is all about real wreck dives, in this case 4 dives on the HMNZS Waikato, a 15min boat ride from Tutukaka harbour. Again I split the group and again I saw some common problems – unfortunately for the students, ones that always make me smile. To give some examples:

Line laying: Although team 1 lays the line, team 2 also has a role - checking that the line doesn't get dragged into line traps, tightening slack line and checking tie-offs. As everyone always feels that they are being assessed, team 1 always wants to lay the line perfectly (generally not going to happen on the first attempt) and resents team 2 adjusting the line. At the same time, team 2 always wants to show that they are not taking a free ride and generally tweaks with the line more than necessary. In Dean and Aidan's case the high point for me was watching Dean untie Aidan's tie off from the bottom torpedo rack and move it to the middle rack – his thinking being that he wouldn't hit his head on the way back. What he completely missed was the fact that there was another rack immediately above the middle one so it was a bit of a pointless exercise. Again, an example of task focussing? A few counselling skills were required after the dive to ensure the "team" remained just that – a team!



Lost line drill: I usually do this in the hanger because it is a nice big space and because most students also think it is a simple space. But have you ever really looked properly at the hanger – if so how many exits are there? There are considerably more than 2 – as Peter found when he started to go through a doorway he'd never seen before. And are the walls and ceiling really flat? What about the 1m wide shelf on both sides? Again finding a lost line in a small space sounds easy, but just ask Aidan how confusing things become when you cannot see.

Line following when blind or sharing air: In order to do this successfully as a team you need to think about creating space and making life easy for your team-mate. If you don't help your mate then it rapidly turns into something quite ugly, with the person at the back getting battered in the face by the fins of the person in front; or the person in front having the reg pulled out of their mouth because the person behind doesn't want to get too close. Luckily I'd put the two Canadians (a incredibly polite race) in the same team and although Dean had given Aidan a massive kicking during the blind exit, thankfully Aidan decided not to beat Dean up once they got back on the boat.

Never go under the line: Watching the problems created when Aaron went under the line whilst Peter (who was holding Aaron and determined not to let go) tried to go over the line. After much laughing I eventually helped them out.



Keep your gear streamlined: Half-way through the blind line exit Aidan started to give me the evil-eye when he kept getting 'pulled back' and slammed into the deck. He was certain that I was messing with him, but couldn't work out why and it wasn't until he spotted his dangling spare regulator jamming on a door frame that he realised it wasn't me at all, but totally his own doing.

Try to visualise the dive: Planning for dive 4, the exploration dive, is always easier if you think logically about what you will encounter. Dean and Aidan had planned to go down a couple of hatches into the crews mess on deck 3 and were worried about how to tie off going through the vertical hatches. It all became clear once I asked 'but how did the sailors get up through the hatch?' The penny dropped very quickly - ladders make great tie off points.

Hopefully if you are thinking about doing this course I haven't put you off. Without fail, my students expend a lot of energy worrying about what actions I'm going to do to "mess with their heads" when they're down there, and as soon as something goes wrong, they assume that it has been done deliberately by me. What they don't realise is that they generally create more than enough problems themselves and it isn't necessary for me to do anything further!

Overall everyone had a great time and many lessons were learned – lessons that will of great use at Easter when we tackle the Lermontov – there I go again, sorry Aaron...