

ID 1928 - Ex Red Wyvern – Red Sea Dive Exped.

Ex Red Wyvern was an overseas Exped to the Red Sea in Egypt, operating on a dive liveaboard vessel that not only acted as a diving platform, but provided us all our accommodation and real life support needs. The Exped was mainly comprised of Reserve and Regular Soldiers from 165 and 17 Port and Maritime Regts, but there were also a small number of personnel from other units who filled empty slots.

The Exped saw us diving on a wide variety of sites from reef to wreck and we progressively built up the diving throughout the week until everyone had built up their experience to a depth of 35 metres and conducted training to allow them to penetrate the wrecks. By the end of the Exped everyone was comfortably operating at depth, safely conducting penetration dives and buoyancy skills were of a high standard.

The Expeds aims were all met. The integration could not have gone better, everyone got on really well and there was no way to distinguish between Reserve and Regular. In fact all the Dive Supervisors and Instructors actually came from the Reserves, showing once more that working together goes both ways. All the sports divers were taken to the limit of their qualification, which is 35m. The abilities of the students also increased greatly, showing excellent buoyancy skills and confidently leading dives.

The Exped began with an early wakeup, briefs and kit checks were completed and we jumped in for the first dive of the Exped. It was a shakedown dive and was all about weight and kit adjustments followed by practicing skills and drills. The site was a sandy plateau near the alternatives dive site, a little bland with very little to see, but we were visited by dolphins when we were trying to do our casualty drills on the surface.

After some theory lessons we had our second dive in the same area but ventured a little further to practice the navigation techniques we had just been taught.

The third dive was a night dive, again in the same area. There was lots to see, loads of fish, spotted rays and the lion fish were using our torch light to hunt.

On day two, early starts and late finishes are clearly starting to take their toll on the Exped members; five people got ready sitting down and tried to stand without untying their kit from the bench, causing great amusement for everyone else. First dive of the day was the stingray station, but unfortunately no stingrays were seen.

Day three took us to the Thistlegorm and everyone was excited for their first dive on this amazing dive wreck. We were lucky enough to be the only ones there and had the whole wreck to ourselves due to the current lack of tourists in Sharm El Sheik. Apparently there are normally loads of divers and this can spoil the experience. We also had our first dive with the Pony cylinders which are a 3lt cylinders with their own regulator giving us an alternate air supply or bailout should something go wrong with our main kit. They are a bit awkward at first as they sit on one side of your main cylinder making you heavier on one side and feel unstable in the water. We soon got used to them and adjusted our weight belts to try and counter this and practiced switching regulators in case we ever had to use them for real.

The next dive was a night dive on the Thistlegorm. Our first dive gave us the opportunity to find our way around so that we shouldn't get too disorientated in the dark. There was a lot more life at night, fish were hiding in small holes others were out hunting. We saw giant moray eels, rays and shoals of fish.

As with every other day, diving gets off to an early start. Another amazing dive on the mighty Thistlegorm made all the better by having the whole dive site to ourselves. Today we went into the cargo holds to see all the different vehicles, motorbikes, trucks, plane parts, ammo. It was like a museum seeing all the old military equipment and took our mind of the fact we had no clear

overhead escape route. For a lot of us this was the first time we had done penetration diving, this is where you can't just swim up to get to safety and why we needed to train and use the pony cylinders. If our main kit was to fail we, need enough air to get us to safety and we might not be able to swim close enough to our buddy to share his air whilst inside the wreck, and this is where the Pony comes in.

All good things must come to an end, but after four great dives over two days on the Thistlegorm we have to press on. The next wreck is the Ulysses, a little bland looking in the brief compared to the Thistlegorm, but everyone is still excited with the prospect of regular visits from Dolphins, but they didn't appear. The Ulysses is an old wreck laid on her side; the wooden decks have rotted away leaving just the beams and letting lots of light into the wreck.

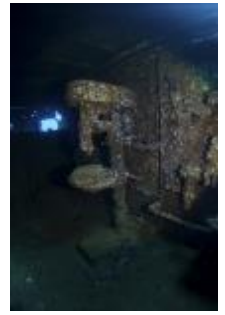
On day six there are a few nervous people as we prepare for a 35m dive, for some this is deeper than they have ever gone. Anything deeper than 30m increases the risk of nitrogen narcosis, in some cases a feeling similar to being intoxicated. All went well with only one person actually feeling any effects.

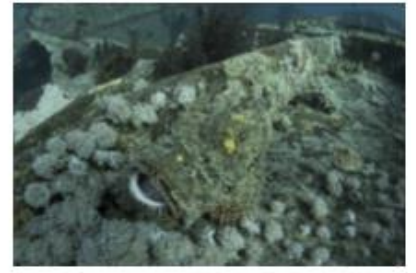
We moved to our final reef where they are four wrecks all in a row, we plan to do three over the next two days. We start with the tile wreck, so called because surprise surprise it's full of tiles! There is actually a bit of confusion over exactly which wreck this is as two identical ships carrying the same cargo, owned by the same company hit the reef a month apart! One has slipped into the great depths leaving just the one, but there are many arguments over which one remains so everyone just calls it the tile wreck. It is a great dive, you enter a crack in the side of the hull and enter through the engineers workshop. You can still see the old pillar drill, lathe and an open tool drawer. From here you exit into one of the cargo holds full of tiles. After a lap of each cargo hold we did a lap of the wreck, as most of it is quite shallow there is a lot of light and reef life making it a very picturesque wreck inside and out.

Last day, but with some great dives still lined up. First we did the Carnatic, very similar looking to the Ulysses, but she still has her bow. The stern is fantastic and reminds us of a pirate ship with what looks like big windows all round. There is a round hole on the bow where the bow spit was once secured and now provides a great little window to look inside the wreck.

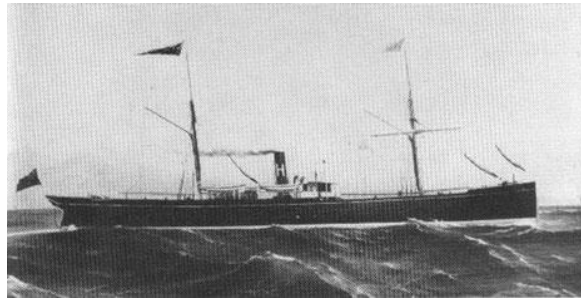
The second dive was the Giannis D, no arguments over the identity of this wreck as there is a giant D on the funnel. This is a great wreck for penetration as you can easily get into the engine room. It was another really enjoyable dive with lots of rooms and two big corridors to explore. Everyone got into the engine room and had a really good explore of the outside of the wreck.

Finally we dived the El Mina, an old Egyptian mine sweeper sunk just outside the harbour of Hurghada. Only a few of us were up for this dive, the rest opting to give it a miss and start cleaning and drying kit ready for the journey home.





SS ULYSSES



Launched 1871 – Wrecked 1887

The Island of Gopal Seghir (little Gopal) lies at the very end of the busy shipping lane which takes its name from the Islands. The Straits of Gopal are found at the point where the north west Red Sea begins to narrow as it becomes the Gulf of Suez. Approaching from the north, it comes right at a time when Captains - two days out of Suez, tend to relax, thinking that the more hazardous stretches of water are behind them. Today of course the islands are lit with navigational lights and ships are fitted with a whole array of navigational aids such as GPS and Radar, but over one hundred years ago things were very different.



The Straits of Gubal

It was an uneventful trip to Port Said for SS Ulysses and a very slow 200 mile canal journey to Suez. Two days later, on the evening of 15th August 1887, Capt Bremner checked the charts one last time before retiring to his cabin. It was at this time, in the early hours of the 16th, the Ulysses struck Gopal Seghir.

At first it seemed that the damage was slight and the pumps could easily handle the small amounts of water being taken on. Regarding the incident as nothing more than an unfortunate grounding, Bremner decided to wait and seek help from any passing ship. Just before daybreak the lights of the British Steamship "Kerbela" came into view and the Master was asked to make all haste for Suez and send immediate assistance.

The Times newspaper of 18th August 1887 contained the following entry under the heading "WRECKS AND CASUALTIES":
"Lloyds agent at Suez telegraphs that the Kerbela, British steamer, reports that the Ulysses, British steamer, is ashore at Jubal Island, and is leaking a little. Assistance has been sent."

The Ulysses was stuck fast on a Coral Reef just north of Bluff Point. Convinced his vessel would eventually be pulled free, Capt Bremner stubbornly refused to jettison any cargo. It was not until the 20th, however, that the much needed assistance would arrive. In the meantime, Capt Bremner completely underestimated the power of a Coral Reef to inflict damage on a steel-hulled vessel. What he could not see was the slow process by which the hull was being weakened as the fully laden Ulysses pivoted steadily on top of a coral head. Without lightening the load - it was only a matter of time.

All this was made worse by a moderate sea and on the morning of August 19th, the Ulysses was down by the stern. The following day, two Lighters with labourers arrived from Suez and HMS Falcon also arrived to offer protection. Realizing the seriousness of the condition of the Ulysses, the Captain of the Falcon also lent some of his crew to assist

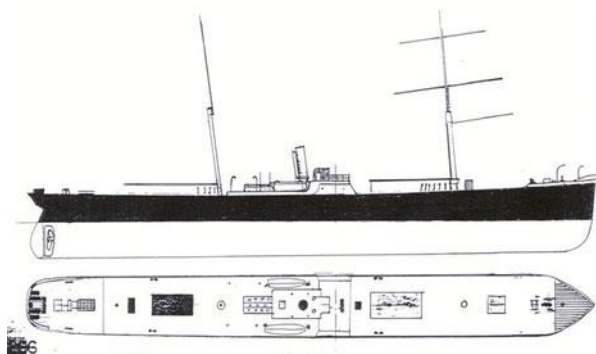
with unloading whilst others were landed to guard both ship and cargo.

It was dirty work in the intense heat of an Egyptian August. With the pumps silenced, the workers had to wade deep into foul water in the holds - sometimes having to swim right into it. Without power, they then had to haul the cargo out of the hold and into the sea where it was man-handled over coral reefs to the shore before finally being carried one third of a mile to the Lighters.

With the Ulysses finally lost, Capt Bremner could do nothing more than watch as his ship settled down onto the Reef - in an almost leisurely fashion, with her bows and bowsprit still in view and pointing upwards.

When nothing more could be done, all parties departed for Suez on 6th September 1887. The Lighters were so fully laden that additional space had to be found on the decks of HMS Falcon for a considerable amount of salvaged cargo. On arrival, Bremner made his official report on the loss of the Ulysses - which was then officially listed as "Abandoned." Bad weather then set in for a few days during which the crippled ship sustained considerable damage before finally disappearing below the surface forever. No specific date for the final sinking was ever recorded.

The loss of the Ulysses was eventually put down to "navigational error" - though fault was never fully established. Whether Capt Bremner had made a mistake - either by setting a wrong course or by issuing wrong instructions, is not known.



Line drawing of the Ulysses

The Ocean Steamship Company selected a "theme" of Greek Mythology when naming their ships and, after a period of successful trading with the Achilles, Ajax and Hector, they expanded and ordered five new sister ships of which the Ulysses was one.

Built by Scott and Co of Newcastle and technically described as an "Iron Screw Steamer - Planked" the Ulysses was launched in 1871. Her dimensions were 95.1m x 10.2m - with a draught of 7.7m. She displaced 1992 gross registered tons. Although rigged for sail, she also possessed that relatively new feature - a funnel. Below decks was a single 2 stroke, 2 cylinder steam engine capable of producing 225 HP - also made in Newcastle by P Stephenson & Co.

Diving the Ulysses



The Ulysses as she is today

The Ulysses lies "up" the Reef with her stern at 27m and bows in very shallow water. The main body of the wreck is now on its port side and most of the decking has rotted away revealing a framework of iron girders.

The stern reveals the beautifully rounded features that were the style of day. The rudder and propeller are still in place and serve to make this entire section the most photogenic. Above the stern a number of original features - such as bollards, winches and railings, are still found.

The vessel is wide open and that means there is virtually no chance of becoming lost inside. Consequently, the Diver is quite able to enter the vessel and explore both internal deck levels with plenty of natural light reaching almost every corner.

The entire vessel is well colonized by all the nearby Corals and Soft Corals which have, through their many years of growth, added a new, and very beautiful, dimension to this particular shipwreck.

