

Trapped Alone at 45M

There will no doubt be trip reports of the YD gig in scapa, which was a great week. For John and I, though, the week was marred by one difficult dive. I have documented this below in the hope that just maybe something in it might help someone who reads it.

Jag had decided on the Wednesday evening not to dive the following day as he had developed a bit of a cold and could not clear his ears properly. This left JW and I to dive the Markgraf at 45-46 metres the next morning. Along with everyone else, we sat down that evening and planned runtimes and gas mixes.

The plan was to dive using twin 12s of 26% giving us a ppO₂ of 1.43 on the bottom, with single side slung stages of 70% nitrox as a rich deco gas for a gas switch at 12 metres. This would give us 26 minutes bottom time, and we should hit the surface with a third of our back gas remaining and approximately 50% remaining in our stages. I was using an AL80 rather than a 7 litre stage, so expected to come out with even more gas as a reserve. Although the gas planning was done in vplanner, we were going to fly the VR3s to the same bottom time, and had cut tables from vplanner and also laminated IANTD Air and 50 tables as a get out of jail free backup. I was going to take position 1 and lead the dive, and John would follow in close behind. The mixes were a little hot in the evening, so I did the maths and worked out the necessary air tops to bring the mixes into line. In the end the gases were spot on, and so we made sure all our kit was ready, and prepared, and then went to bed to get a good night's sleep before what we knew would be a challenging dive. The visibility in Scapa Flow at the moment is terrible, ranging between 3 metres and less than a metre, and so we had our serious faces on, rather than taking the dive for granted.

In the morning, the weather was pretty nasty, and on the way out we could see the sea raging in the open ocean, but luckily we were protected in the flow from the worst of it, so after a brief chat, we decided, along with just about everyone else on the boat, to proceed with the dive as planned. We kitted up, and for some reason I decided to take John's spare wreck reel with me, as with the DIR stuff I have been doing, I had only been using a spool. The VR3 was also a little "uncompliant" but in the end I was very glad I had it.

We jumped in and made our way through a fairly significant swell to the shotline. At the shot I signalled down and off we went, with me leading and John right behind me, exactly as planned. At approximately 25 metres I decided to fire the salvo. Nothing. A buzz, and no light. Shitsticks. I guess I should have called the dive at this point, but there's no point debating it, and what we actually did was reverse the team roles, with John leading with his monster greenforce, and me tucked in literally within elbow distance using a Halcyon scout, which in the darkness actually performed very well. I let John know the Salvo wasn't playing and we both indicated we were happy to continue the dive as planned.

We swam towards the bows of the wreck just above the seabed at 45 metres, and reached the bows very quickly. We stayed there for thirty seconds or so, and very impressive they were too. The visibility was somewhere around the 3 metre mark, but it was as dark a dive as I have ever been on. If it wasn't within the tightly focused beam of the torch, it didn't exist. However, all was well and repeated checks of each other revealed we were both comfortable. In fact, due to how close we were to each other, I believe we were diving very well as a buddy pair, and basically enjoying what was a deep but relaxing dive.

We moved round to the port side of the wreck, and continued swimming along the side. We were navigating by keeping the wreck within torchlight, which meant we were 2, maybe three metres away from it. At approximately 11 minutes, the wreck disappeared, leaving us in the middle of a black void. We looked at each other and presumed we had accidentally swam away from the wreck, and so turned right approximately 45 degrees to meet the wreck again. What must have happened is that we swam over one of the large blast holes, and in the lack of visibility, and due to the sheer scale of the holes, we simply turned into the wreck and then swam into it.

We found a wall and swam along it. We also moved up a couple of metres. At approximately 13 minutes bottom time, the wall came to a junction with two other walls, as if we had swam into a metal toilet roll holder and someone had scrunched up the end. It came to a point, with walls all around us,

and no room for us to move.

At this point, possibly assisted by the narcosis, both of us quite literally lost our minds. All out flailing panic ensued for maybe 30 seconds, maybe a minute. It was the longest minute of my life. Extremely thorough discussions with John have revealed a similar pattern, but his demons are his own to bear, and no doubt haunt him as they haunt me, and I have no right to post them here. Below is a short paragraph detailing just how a few of those moments felt. I have removed much of what I wrote here as I find it haunting, and John's feeling is that he and I know how it felt, and that is what matters.

John! John!, Oh ****, he's seen it too, its another wall of the ship. Bail Up. OH **** NO. The ceiling is enclosed, and behind us appears to be closed too!. ****, NO NO NO NO NO NO PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE NO I don't wanna die, no no, I don't wanna die, please no help me god no. JOHN! SWIM! DOWN! DOWN! I'm going. At the bottom. Viz has closed to zero and no torch. OH shit where's john, he didn't follow me I'm on my own, nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo. What will it be like to die. how will that last breathe feel knowing there's nothing to swap to. I want to be with you now! I'll give up diving immediately, just please let me go home. please. GET A ****ING GRIP OR YOU ARE GOING TO DIE. You can breathe. Let's look at the gauge. ****, that wasn't a good idea, let's not look at that again, I can either breathe or I can't. OK. EVALUATE. You have no torch to speak of, but the viz is now zero anyway. You don't know where John is. I can't help him right now, I have got to get myself out now. Gas is 80 bar, that aint going to last long. ****. OK, Need a plan. come on Gareth, think. OK, I'm on the bottom, what's the depth. 43 metres. bolox. bolox. Bolox, it's not the seabed. Get a grip. OK, swim, swim, swim, Hatchway in the floor. decision time. Never saw a hatch coming in, but saw **** all coming in anyway. gotta make a call. Do it, through the hatch and down. 46 metres and pebbles. YES, you ****ING BEAUTY. Next plan, swim for a bit and look up until you can see any sort of green above. Swim, Swim. Eh? Oh Christ no, the pebbles have given way to rivets and armour plate, and heres another wall. Ceiling still enclosed. Pleaase nooo, I don't wanna die today. NO WAY. Let me out you bitch. Turn 90 degrees, feel along the wall. Can't see a bloody thing. swim along, swim swim swim. check up. I can see green!!!!!!!!!!!! OH THANK ****.

Having lost John on the way out, and swam out without him, I then beat myself up pretty badly and hung outside the wreck for a minute trying to decide what to do. I decided that psychologically I needed a way up immediately, and as long as I had that I could face going back in, which I had to do to be able to live with myself. I bagged up with a big wreck reel (thank god I took that and not just a spool deployable from 21M) and then tied it off to the wreck. That line extending 45 M into the sky one perhaps the most beautiful thing I have ever seen and all the way up I was expecting it to stop as it hit a ceiling somewhere I could not see. I swallowed the intense fear I was still feeling and decided to go back in to the wreck to look for John. I couldn't see and had had no formal line laying course, so had to make it up as I went along. I tied off a spool to the reel that was secured to the wreck and then tied it off at another point close to the wreck as a backup in case something worked loose. Having no torch to speak of, I then felt my way back towards and underneath the wreck, keeping the line tight and creating wraps every couple of metres. After turning corners, and going through different areas, I eventually decided that if he was still in there, I wasn't going to find him, and he was either out or not. That was perhaps the worst moment of the dive for me, as I turned around, thinking I was leaving him alone in the wreck.

Back at the bag, I tidied up the spool and put it all away. I had overstayed my welcome on the markgraf and had racked up quite a bit of deco, so began the long ascent alone. At 6 metres, during the 24 mins of stops, I put my thoughts together about what I would tell John's family if he wasn't on the boat. After completing all my stops I hit the surface 66 minutes after leaving it.

On the surface, I am obviously the last diver up and the boat is standing off within 100 metres. That skipper really has his shit together. The boat is beside me in moments. On the ladder, I scream through the reg "Where's John?" and Gizmo says "He's here, he's on O2". I nearly fall off the ladder as the tension leaves me. I climb up the ladder and sit down. Gizmo and air Assisted do me proud and my kit disappears around me whilst I sit there with tears in my eyes. Everyone is being great, but I need to be with John, he's the only one who will understand the look in my eyes, the only one I care about right now. The only one I left in the wreck. I rip off my drysuit and head downstairs to where John is laying down and are administering O2. JAG has blatantly taken control of dealing with John and is sitting next to him with a "don't even try to get me to leave" look on his face. Top man. Juz and Blanaid are assisting admirably like the experienced divers they are. Joe and Simon are running

through a 5 minute neuro test. I collapse next to John and hold his arm. He seems ok. I go into shock at this point and start to shake like a leaf. I get out of my clothes and get into something warm, but the shaking does not stop. Shock has obviously got me in its grip.

Only at this point do I ask why John is on O2. He has voluntarily missed 14 minutes of stops himself at 6 metres to see if I was on the boat. He wanted to feel like he had done everything possible to help me, somewhat convinced himself on the way up that I was most likely dead, but willing to go into the pot on the off chance that raising the alarm will help me. This is why I dive with John and JAG. Balls of steel, the pair of them. I feel bad at this point. I did all my deco, and coldly decided to finish it rather than heading up, convinced he was dead already and going to the surface would provide no solutions. Right or wrong, we make our decisions at the time, but that one definitely haunts me.

As John is not showing any symptoms, skipper heads back to the stromness, and radios ahead to the pot that someone is on O2. A doctor comes to meet the boat and takes John up to the pot. At this point, I am wandering around in a daze, and in retrospect, pretty deeply in shock and collapse into my bunk. The dreams were, well, a close second in terms of horror to the reality. Waking up a couple of hours later I find the boat deserted as everyone has headed off to Kirkwall. I, for some reason, assume the pot is in Kirkwall so wait anxiously for a call. Eventually I manage to get hold of JAG, who is sitting next to the pot John is in (no surprise there) and John is apparently fine. Learning the pot is only ten minutes from the boat, I race up there myself in time to see John coming out of the pot. He is fine, although clearly as deeply shaken as I am.

John is banned from diving for 4-6 weeks, and I cancel my next days dive as at that point I was ready for selling my kit. We decide to do the only thing people who have come close to death can do. We get totally and utterly shitfaced together, compare feelings, thoughts, profiles, timings, gases, everything we could.

Working through the number in the cold light of day, we swam into the wreck together after 13 minutes and became almost immediately separated in the panic. In turning turtle and swimming to the seabed I had, to my everlasting shame, kicked off John's mask to add to his nightmare. I have obviously received unending but hopefully humerously intended snipes from the YD crew about that since I surfaced. Putting his mask on he found himself alone and in absolute zero viz as the two of us in our panic had kicked the shit out of it. Making our separate ways out of the wreck, we believe we came out different routes. I had made it out of the wreck in 4-5 minutes, though it really seemed like an eternity. John took nearer ten, so I can only begin to imagine the horror he experienced in the darkness. I then went back into the wreck to search for John for another 8-10 minutes, meaning John was out of the wreck whilst I was still inside looking for him. John left the seabed somewhere around 28 minutes, with me about 7 minutes behind him. John missed 14 minutes of stops on the way up – voluntarily I would stress, and I completed all mandatory deco. Total runtime for John was 36 minutes. Total runtime for me was 66 minutes. These numbers may not be 100%, we still have some comparisons of profiles to do.

Lessons learned and repercussions.

- Should we have called the dive on the shotline when the torch failed – maybe
- Should we have called the dive when we lost the wreck – maybe
- Would trimix have avoided the totally out of control panic – maybe. I do wonder how much of the problem was narcosis. Fear I can deal with, worry I can deal with. This was full-on out of control panic, and that is something I can live without ever experiencing again.

There are a lot of maybe's on this dive. However, both of us feel that we are not remotely interested in the opinion of anyone who was not in that hole feeling like they were going to die. It's easy to sit at a computer and plan what you would do differently. When you think you are minutes from death, you can't be as rational and you live with the decisions you make. I have my regrets. I wish I hadn't swam down without him assuming he would see me and follow, but dragged him to the seabed with me. I sure as hell wish I hadn't kicked his mask off. I wish I hadn't panicked but dealt with it calmly and rationally. I feel bad for selfishly completing my deco when John was so very selfless about his, but those are the decisions we make in the deep dark, and we have to live with them. I genuinely felt that I could not add to the solution by surfacing early and John was either dead or he wasn't. Truth be told. At various points in the dive, we both thought we were almost certainly doing to die and be left in the wreck. At other points, we both thought our opposite number was dead and left inside the wreck. We were both wrong, and in the cold light of day's that's really all that matters.

It was very frightening.

Please do NOT geen me for this thread. There were two of us in that wreck, and although the text is mine, we wrote this report together.