

Normandy Wreck Week

18th September

We have 2 accounts for 18 September. The first, by Ali Bessel, is followed by one by Mark Rayiru, who was soon (November 2014) to become our new chairman!

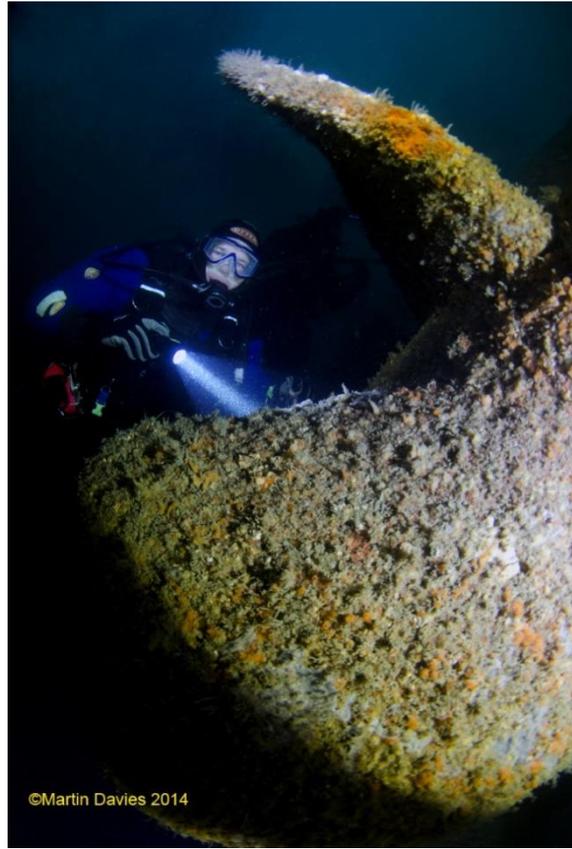
Ali Bessel: Bloody hell I do not do mornings!! This is officially “glaze over Thursday”. We get up, it is dark. We get there, it is dark. Actually let’s be honest, it is night time. Dawn is not a fan of “night dives”. Warns us she may bail out. Close to going back to bed myself! But the ride out on the rib seeing the sun come up was fantastic. A special journey. And then the dive on the M39, a German minesweeper, sunk in about 30m water was amazingly good. As we descended, got to 20 odd metres on the shot and could see the wreck covered in divers’ lights. When we got there, it seemed about 6m viz, a dark 6 but 6 none the less. However it seemed like a scene out of “Close Encounters” when Martin came over a piece of wreckage, can only have been Martin with a light array like that. It was almost impossible to get out of the way of people and lights. Bit of a communication problem with my trio, me, Dawn and Irish John. Everyone thinks I am stationary to take pictures the whole time and my requests about which way everyone wanted to go seemed to get no clear response, so I just went back to plodding about. Turns out they were waiting for me to stop taking pictures so they could move. Bit of a Catch 22 there I think. Even heard Dawn comment to a different buddy on another dive that “we don’t have Ali with us on this dive so we can move”. Outrageous misrepresentation!

M39. A German Minesweeper

Description	Not much was known about his particular ship except that she was a M35 type minesweeper which was the most numerous type in the Kriegsmarine and like all in her class didn’t have a name just a number. She was torpedoed and sunk by a British MTB shortly before D-Day on 24 May 1944. We found her lying on her port side at almost 90 degrees to the sand sea bed. The wreck is broken in 2 parts, folded back on itself. Each part appeared fairly intact, except for the midships section with her large starboard four bladed propeller still visible as were her double rudders. Her port propeller appeared to be buried in the sea bed.
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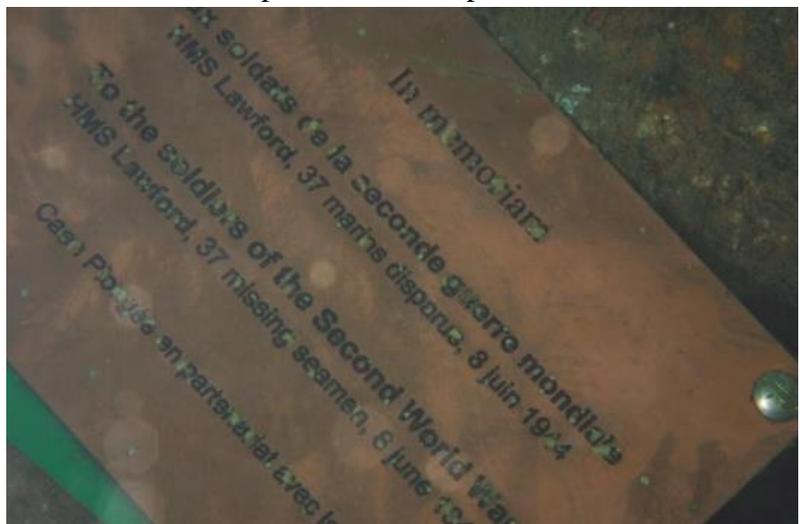
A minesweeper of the same class as the M39. Courtesy Kriegsmarine Coastal Forces, by Gordon Williamson and illustrated by Ian Palmer, published by Osprey Publishing in 2009, page 8.



Length	68m	
Beam	8.7m	
Tonnage	870	Armament: 2x10.5cm, 1x3.7cm, 2x2cm flak. 4 depth charge launchers. 30 mines
Approx Depth	34m	

The second dive, was HMS Lawford, a frigate, sunk by enemy fire in 1944. On the way out, Doug’s HP hose blew. Out came the blanking ports, adjustable, Allen keys, and 10 minutes later, a working set up was arranged and the dive continued. Catherine had offered to give up her dive so Doug could have her kit and not miss it, as she had “been down on it a 100 times and was willing to take one for the team”. We found a spare hose, and spared her that sordid alternative outcome to the situation.

Roger, Dawn and I dived together. A plaque on the wreck reminded us of the thirty-seven members of her crew that died here. The viz was excellent, maybe 8-10m or more, and the piles of twisted metal, seen in context against this great ship, made the tragedy of it very real. Do we ever really realise how



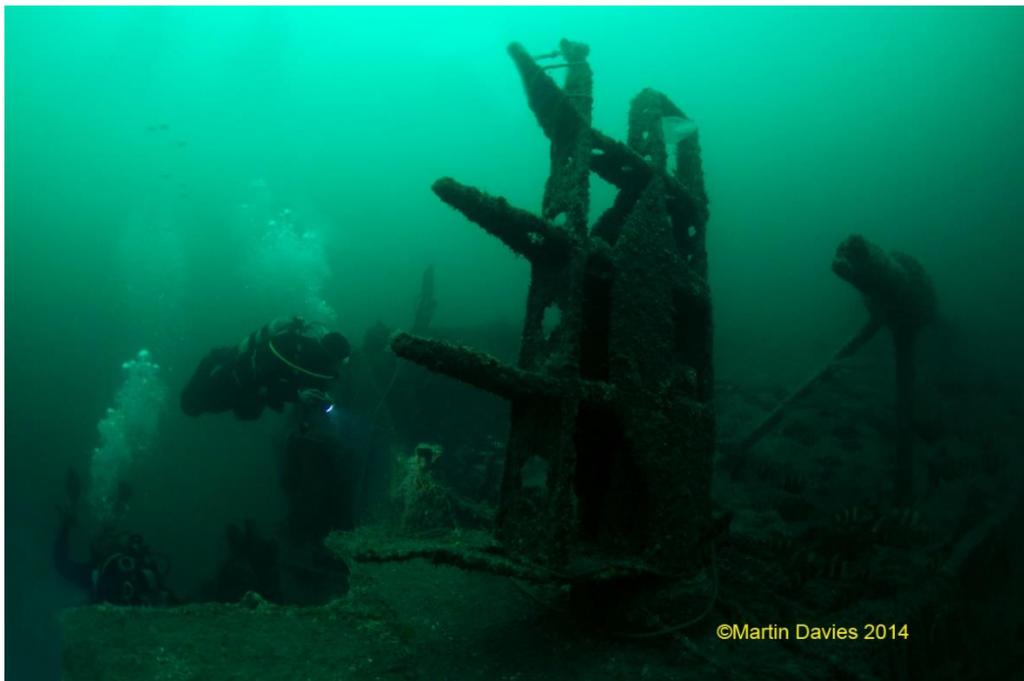
lucky we are to be making this interesting, exciting, recreational dive on the site of such tragic events full of fear, courage, desperation and loss. I don't think we really do. Not most of the time anyway.

HMS Lawford. A British Destroyer Escort

Description	HMS Lawford was built as a US destroyer escort, but was transferred almost straight after launching to the Royal Navy under the lend/lease arrangements and became a British destroyer escort of the Captain Class. During the D-Day operations she was acting as the Assault Force HQ of the 7 th Canadian Infantry Brigade. Early on 8 June she was attacked by German aircraft and struck by an aerial torpedo which broke the ship in 2. The wreck now lies off Juno beach in 2 parts a little way apart, with a debris field between.
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HMS Lawford in Feb 1944. © Imperial War Museum (Photo A21817)



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Length	88m
Beam	17m
Tonnage	1100
Approx Depth	24m

And here's Mark's account of the day:

Mark Rayiru: The day began at 4:30am! My lack of enthusiasm for starting this early was reflected by the others at breakfast, the usually animated conversation was noticeably absent this morning. Following a 10 minutes' drive we arrived at the dive centre and things began to perk up. The dive centre became a hive of activity as 20+ divers began to assemble their gear. A bright starlit sky and crescent moon added to the ambience and the group as a whole began to brush aside the cobwebs of fatigue.

Lionel's description of the German mine sweeper M39, interjected with his by now familiar good humour, perked our enthusiasm further. By the time the brief was finished and the boats loaded, faces looked happier. The 40ish minute rib ride was fairly smooth and relatively quiet, most of us admiring the stars and perhaps wondering what the dive might be like. Jim Fuller kept his 'rib cred' intact, sporting his Sun shades despite the night sky!

The dive itself was fantastic, delivering everything that you could want from diving. Although dark, the water was clear, offering 8-10meters of viz. As we swam around parts of

the stern section we found an abundance of marine life in and around the ship. Some of the largest lobsters I have seen along with large conger eels hid in nooks and crannies. Crabs could be seen almost wherever you searched, and shoals of good sized pouting swam by. The tompons were larger than most I have seen in the UK. The wreck itself remains fairly well intact, and the sections and wreckage littering the nearby sea bed are easy to identify. Following this dive our enthusiasm received another boost. Sitting on the rib soon after surfacing, we were privileged to watch a picture perfect sunrise. Most of us watching it and squinting or shading our eyes with our hands. Jim Fuller smiling to himself!! Following a 4-hour surface interval, which saw most of the divers snoozing, laying in the sun trying to recharge their energy levels, kit was re-assembled and the boats reloaded.

The second dive was no disappointment either. HMS Lawford was another great wreck dive with conditions and marine life similar to the M39. All in all a great days diving which I think it's safe to say exceeded our expectations. Following our return to the accommodation people cleaned themselves up and prepared for a late evening meal at the local restaurant. I was too tired and instead fell asleep writing this!

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