

Normandy Wreck Week

19th September

We again have 2 diaries for the following day, 19 September. The first was written by Ali Bessel, the second, which follows immediately after is by Jim Fuller and Martin Davies.

Ali Bessel: The Empire Broadsword. An Infantry landing ship, sunk by a mine in 1944. What a fantastic dive. Another 45 minute steam out. Dawn opted not to dive due to exhaustion. So Roger and I descended to see the upper section of the wreck from about 10m. The wreck spread out in front of us. So much visible, about 10m viz perhaps, far more than I was ever expecting. Huge sheets of metal, exposed inner sections, recesses, overhangs, all beckoning you in, but we did as we were told and stayed out! I found that I did not notice the fauna so much as the wreck was so impressive and immense that I was overawed by it. We soon lost sight of other divers, which was a bonus, to have the solitude as you stared at this immense piece of history.

However, the huge outer walls of the ship were covered by short faunal turf and sponges, notably *Tethya citrina*, along with *Cliona celata*, *Raspailia ramosa*, *Dysidea fragilis* and Axinelids. The lobsters were so massive and happily perched out on the wreckage, probably knowing no-one was going anywhere near them at that size! This dive I could do over and over again.



Tethya citrina

Empire Broadsword. A British Troopship or Landing Ship Infantry Large (LSI) (L)

<p>Description</p>	<p>A Liberty ship acquired under the lend/lease arrangement originally the Cape Marshal but renamed once transferred to British ownership. She took part in the landings on Sword beach delivering 1300 troops and 18 landing craft. On 2 Jul, while manoeuvring to land troops near Omaha beach, she struck 2 mines. The ship broke in 2 and sank after about 25 minutes, the many casualties being rescued by several nearby small boats The wreck now lies in about 25m, and is reasonably intact except around the mine impact areas. At the stern a 4" gun can be found and the rudder is still in position. Ammunition is scattered nearby. The top of the wreck is within 10m of the surface.</p>
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Length	120m
Beam	18m
Tonnage	7200
Approx Depth	25m

The second dive was the Charles Elliot, a liberty ship, which struck a mine. Can't say this went as well as the morning dive. Thick greeny-brown murk for the top few meters, apparently due to river Seine draining into the area. The viz was about 3-4m, murky but usable. Wreckage very extensive and again impressive. For the fauna enthusiasts, large areas were covered in the anemone *Actinothoe sphyrodeta* and the sponge *Amphilectus fucorum*. *Actinothoe* and *Amphilectus fucorum*.

The dive was very interesting but Roger and I lost each other after about 30 minutes. Spotted Ali and Martin. Asked them, by waving arms about etc. but they had not seen him. So, one delayed SMB deployment later, up I went, with Ali and Martin joining me for the ride. Always tense until you see your buddy show up somewhere. All found. All sorted. And relax. Well I would have relaxed,



Actinothoe and Amphilectus fucorum

if I had not seen my normal buddy Derek, in the other boat, ranting about how I was going to kill Roger for losing me.....all related to a recent incident (but one of many), where Derek and I lost each other....very different circumstances, which did result in me wanting to cause Derek much

suffering and general pain, for historic reasons. But that is one of those “you had to be there” situations!

Charles W Eliot. A liberty ship sunk by mines on 28 June 1944

Description	A liberty ship similar to the picture below. Engine: Two oil-fired boilers, three-cylinder, reciprocating steam engine, single screw, 2,500 horsepower. Armament: 1 x stern mounted 4"/102 mm deck gun Struck 2 mines, towed offshore and sunk in 2 parts, now well broken up
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A model of a Liberty Ship similar to Charles W Eliot. © Imperial War Museum (Model 954)







Length	135m
Beam	17
Tonnage	7200
Approx Depth	20m

A lovely last meal was had in our local food venue for the week, the small café near the gite that Catherine had resourced for us all, where the proprietors opened up specially for us in the evening. They even made special vegetarian food for our team member Derek, the most unlikely vegetarian you are going to meet. Apart from Hitler maybe!!! In fact, trying to get vegetarian food in France was a bit interesting all week! Apart from the local café, the most decadent thing I saw him eat was cheese on toast on a bed of salad. There's loads of fresh fruit and tomatoes! What's he moaning about?

Not sure Dawn will invite us back in her van. Four people, dive kit and sand is not a good combination for someone with a lot of cleanliness and tidiness neuroses. A lot of sweeping went on, the result of which was destroyed 5 minutes later when we all got back in. Combine that with Derek's tendency to "spread things out" and I think, if there were not a "blacklist" before, there is one now.

Here's another take on the day, written by Jim Fuller and Martin Davies:

Jim Fuller: Friday started with the air outside still, a bright crescent moon shining down from a cloudless sky, accompanied Orion and its cousins in their full glory.

Then there was a slight disturbance at 05:10 when Mark and Tom woke, as today Tom had to leave the team and travel back to the UK, Mark had volunteered to be his chauffeur for the first part of the Toms' private expedition, which would involve travelling home by van (Mark's), train, bus, boat and car.

The peace was soon totally shattered by the melody of uncoordinated alarms announcing the start of the diving day at 05:30. Whilst an hour later than yesterday this unearthly hour waking still early enough to be classed as silly o'clock. Very soon the team drifted to the breakfast room in various states of readiness, preparedness and zombification. The excellent Françoise, proprietor of the Gite, had provided a fare of continental breakfast, and a kettle, so we had access to copious amounts of tea and coffee. After eating our fill we quickly organised our kit and ourselves for the drive to the dive centre. This scene was (as always) one of apparent chaos, with people wandering randomly with items of often unidentifiable equipment, punctuated by calls of "where's my whatever?" and "who put that step there?". But behind that facade of chaos twenty divers had woken, breakfasted and were ready to travel within forty minutes.

So, by 06:10, five cars, all travelling rather low on their suspension with their cargos of people and equipment were making their pre-dawn journey north to the dive centre, directed by the ever-patient and never sleeping lady living their owners' Tom-toms.

We were meeting at the dive centre by the sight of the pre-dawn twilight in the east promising another fine day, while to the North West an electrical storm provided a natural firework show. It also was directly over the proposed dive site so we started our final preparations with some degree of apprehension of what the day would bring. Very soon there was the same mêlée as at the Gite, as twenty divers found cylinders analysed gasses, assembled and loaded kit into their correct boats and generally did all the little rituals that are needed before a dive.

All too soon the sound of this industrious activity was interrupted by Lionel's call of "Briefing", Lionel is a man of few words, and very few of them are in English. Rapidly twenty divers were gathered around the white board while Lionel reiterated the standard safety precautions, and then told us about the morning quarry, ably assisted by Cat and Kevin providing translations and gesticulations. Our target was the "Empire Broadsword".

Immediately after the briefing Lionel drove the boats to the water. Although the boats were fairly new, the same could not be said of the tractor. Indeed it had no working lights; this issue was circumnavigated by Lionel's head mounted lamp. Soon both boats were in the water, the glow of the impending dawn to the east lighting the sea with an eerie light, and the electrical storm over the proposed dive site still providing vigorous pyrotechnic display.

At exactly seven fifteen engines were started, everybody leapt aboard the ribs (some with more style and elegance than others), and two loaded boats made best speed to the dive site in what was surprisingly calm sea. The voyage time to the dive site was almost an hour, during which we were treated to an awe inspiring sunrise, as the swollen disk of the sun rose above the horizon, only to then be partially eclipsed by bands of clouds filling the eastern sky with a rich mixture of yellows and reds. As this was occurring in the east, the storm above the dive site was rapidly dissipating, much to our combined relief.

Arriving at the dive site the first pair where quickly in the water and tying off the shot line. On the boats the second wave of divers assisted the first wave kit up, and very soon pairs of divers were dropping into the water for their exploration of this massive vessel. Finally it was my turn; I was diving with Pierre, skipper of one of the dive boats. Having tied our boat to the shot line, and leaving Lionel on the surface



in the other boat to look after everything, we kitted up and after our checks dropped into the water. Descending without fuss to nearly thirty meters, Pierre untied the shot line and sent the shot weight to the surface with a lifting bag ("parachute" as the French call them and SMBs). Starting on the stern I was given a tour on the ship, which was complete with rudder, stern gun, decking fittings. Travelling along its length we visited the mast and bridge before reaching the part that was destroyed by the mines. In visibility exceeding twelve meters, our dive was all too soon over and we performed our ascent, stopping briefly for a deep stop before reaching five meters and completing a five minute stop.

On the surface we were quickly recovered by our rib expertly being skipped by one of the teams Irish members. Since we were the last in, we were the last to surface, so as soon as we were on board, and had given (shouted) our dive details to Lionel we set off for the dive centre. Again the sea state was benign, and we made rapid progress as we all talked excitedly about how good the dive was. In the distance we could see several bands of rain sweeping the countryside; however after such a splendid dive nothing could dampen our spirits.

By 10:30 we were back at the dive centre. While a rest was called for, we first had to assist recovering the ribs and then disable our kit so the cylinders to be taken to the compressor station for refills. With well-practised else this was speedily completed so we could get down to the important tasks of eating and sleeping. Different people and groups had different plans for lunch; mine was a short walk to the shops, where I equipped myself with a couple of very freshly baked

baguettes and some ham to share with my travel companions. Having eaten our fill, rest was the next step, and very soon the area around the dive centre and car park had divers sleeping or resting on every horizontal surface.

The storms we had seen at sea did not reach us, so our rest was not interrupted until 13:30 when we collected our cylinders, reassembled our kit and reloaded them on the ribs. At 13:45 Lionel called briefing, and we found ourselves gathered around the white board once more. Our prey this time was the Charles Elliot ... more from the book.

Launching the ribs took place with the ease bred from familiarity and we soon found ourselves heading out to sea for two hundred meters. The dive centre is located just to the west of the landing point of the Gold beach mulberry harbour breakwaters, and at low tide it is necessary to stay close to the Phoenix unit to travel the scour to avoid beaching on the sandbanks that traverse the shallow waters. The boat in which I was travelling did not quite stay close enough to the concrete monoliths. And we stopped. So off we jumped into water not knee high, and pushed the rib off, to the ovation of the people in the other rib. Soon we were off again, the storms we had

sighted in the distance had disappeared and the sea state had become dead flat. Forty minutes of full throttle found us at the dive site. Again the shot was quickly deployed, and divers were soon rolling into the water. Again I was diving with Pierre and we last in. Once in the water we went down to twenty meters, and Pierre sent the shot up on a lifting bag. Again I was led on a full tour, and in the six meter visibility we explored the debris field, as the ship's original hull had collapsed. Among the field were all types of deck machinery and equipment, along with the masts.



Again the end of the dive came all too soon, and we headed cautiously to the surface. While waiting out our five meter stop we noticed that the water was bright and greenish blue on one side of us and dark and brown on the other. It was surreal spinning through 360 degrees and seeing these two different worlds. On surfacing the reason was apparent, there was a weather front directly overhead, with clear sky on one side of us, and dark clouds on the other. Strangely there was no wind, and the sea surface was as flat as a mill pond. We were soon heading back, however Lionel had a couple of treats lined up. Rather than head for the dive centre, we taken on a tour of the Gold beach Phoenix units close up.

After recovery of the ribs, and since most of us were not diving again we disassembled and thoroughly washed our kit, only for it to pick up more sand while drying in the car park. At this point Lionel brought out aperitifs, and we all joined in thanking Lionel, Cat and Ali in making the trip possible.

A short drive later saw twenty tired divers arrive back at the Gite. Tired but excited by the days diving, everyone unloaded their cars and put their dive kit out to dry. Very quickly diving paraphernalia was hanging on every line, gate, slide, swing and table tennis table around the

courtyard. Quick freshen ups were followed by a walk down the road to the restaurant, where we were greeted with a special appetisers, followed by a three course meal of started, steamed fish and rice, finished off with apple tart, and a few drinks. And a lot of talking about the diving

Back at the Gite both the excitement and preparations for departure continued. Talk of the diving that had taken place, and plans for future dives with the newly forged friendships were intermingled by Ali and Dawn sorting out finances for the trip, while the coffee, beer, tea and wine flowed.

Sometime after midnight the last of the night owls made their way to bed, and the Gite was quiet apart from the sound of dive kit fluttering in the breeze and snoring coming from every room.

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