Zarefah Story

Having done several trips over the years onboard MV Jean-Elaine diving the flow, we had decided to venture out and try the Northern Isles for a change. It was Saturday 13th July 2002 when we arrived in Stromness to be welcomed by glorious sunshine! After the usual sorting out of kit etc we set off to The Ferry Inn to say hello to everyone we hadn't seen for the last 12 months and to catch up on local news.

Sunday broke with fine sunshine and the flow looked like a mill pond, we therefore decided to do a couple of shakedown dives on the Kronprinz Wilhelm. Sunday afternoon was spent back in Stromness with most people tinkering with kit and dashing off to the local dive shop (sort it now Andy had said there are no dive shops where we're going) Monday saw us on our way out of the flow via Hoxa sound towards Kirkwall where we were to spend the night. We couldn't however leave the flow without Phil Bennett doing a quick dive over the 'Bottle Dive' site to collect a few ''Scollies'' for the week ahead.

Once settled in Kirkwall Jean-Elaine's owner/skipper Andy Cuthbertson suggested a Chinese, so off we all trotted down the back streets of Kirkwall for a banquet. It was during the meal that Andy mentioned some research he was carrying out into a luxury yacht that had been purchased by the navy for mine laying duties during the First World War. The vessel was known as HM Yacht Zarefah and according to records she struck a mine on May 8th 1917 off Deerness and sank with the loss of all 16 crew. Andy said he had been looking for this wreck for some time with little success but had recently got an interesting 'blip' on the echo sounder that last time he was in the area. It could he said be the Zarefah or a pile of rocks! As he plied me with another drink he enquired if I thought anyone would mind ''popping down and having a look'' when we past over the site the following day. Easily bought 'of course' I said, 'we will sort something out'.

As we steamed out of Kirkwall the next morning I went around the rest of the team and mentioned the proposition that had been put to me. I was really keen to get the possible chance to discover an undived wreck and was willing to take the chance of just finding a heap of boulders as part of the experience. Most of the team was of a similar mind but the odd one or two were a little concerned of potentially wasting a dive if it was just a load of rocks! After much discussion it was decided that once we had got on site and 'shotted' the mark I would pop down and take a look. The plan was if I got to the bottom of the shot line and found lots of boulders I would just send up my 'sausage type' DSMB and ascend. This would let everyone know not to bother getting in. They could then do a dive at a different site later on. If on the other hand no buoy came up they were to get in 10 minutes later.

As we got closer to the site Andy briefed me, he said because the Zarefah was carrying mines and had reportedly struck a mine, she probably went down following a large explosion, the wreckage therefore may be well scattered and possibly buried in the sandy bottom. If I did find any wreckage I may have to use anything possible to identify the wreck as the Zarefah.

The target depth was 40m and I had planned a bottom time of 20 minutes to search the area, for this I was going to use air as a bottom gas and 80% nitrox as a deco gas. We arrived on site just before lunch, Andy used his previous GPS co-ordinates to pass directly over the mark first time (he's good!) as the echo sounder started to show the outline of the mysterious object I could feel the excitement building. A second pass criss crossed the first and showed a similar box type shape. On

the third pass Andy's assistant Ronnie launched the shot line overboard. I started to kit up as Andy did a final pass and confirmed Ronnie had got it spot on. What a team!

As I continued to get ready the rest of the team started to slowly get there kit sorted. Andy stuck his head out of the wheel house and announced we were just approaching slack water and that I could go whenever I was ready. The Adrenalin was now building, what would I find at the bottom of the shot line? The unknown gave me a real buzz! As I entered the water it felt like the beginning of an adventure but I had to remind myself it could be an adventure that doesn't get past the prelude. I swam to the shot line and slowly descended the gentle sag in the line trailed below me and disappeared into the gloom. As I passed the 20m point the visibility started to improve and as I strained to see below me the butterflies in my stomach intensified, 'what was down there?' Passing 30m the shot line seemed to disappear into what looked like a black hole, or was it an object. Initially I couldn't work out what it was but as I got closer the disappointment started to set in 'rocks' as I got closer 'one very big rock!' I looked all around and could see only sand for about 7 or 8m in either direction, I was gutted but continued down the last few meters, as I approached the top of the ''rock'' I noticed something unusual, this rock seemed to have rivets running along it! I got a rush of Adrenalin and dropped to the sea bed for a better look, what we saw on the echo sounder was in fact a boiler! Looking all around I could only see sand there was no sign of any other wreckage, the visibility was quite good considering I was at 40m I could see 7m quite easily without the use of torch! I swam out about 8m away from the boiler so I could just keep it on the fringe of my vision then started a circular sweep looking for any other signs of wreckage. After a short period of time I came across a piece of curved metal sticking out of the sea bed, it initially looked like a square port hole but as I started to dig it out (which was very easy in the sand bottom) It became apparent it was a brass hatchway which appeared to have some form of lettering stamped on it. Hoping this could aid identification I attached a strap to it, clipped on a lift bag and sent it to the surface.

What I didn't realize was at this point everyone back on board Jean-Elaine was just about ready when my lift bag broke the surface. Ronnie in his haste announced I had sent my 'sausage' up and that it must have been just a pile of rocks. Amongst moans and groans they apparently all started to de-kit. A highly amused Andy meanwhile put down his mug of tea, stuck his head out of the wheel house window and shouted 'that's not his sausage that's his lift bag, he's found something!' The scene that followed was it is said akin to the start of the Le Mans 24 hour race, I'm sorry I missed it but I am told they were all in the water very quickly.

I unaware of what was going on topside had moved on and had started to find more debris, small items at first which brought me to larger sections and then what I presumed was the remains of the main wreckage! It was well broken up but parts were recognizable there was a large caravan type roof section with lovely tiny brass port holes all around it, it was the type of structure you would expect to find on a large yacht. Close to this was a lot of mangled pieces of structure one particular piece contained a WC and sitting next to it a full rack of 2lb shells! The shells could be a good clue so I examined one of them, despite the safety caps being in place I managed to rub my finger over the base and reveal the date stamp '1913', we were certainly in the right era! Most of the wreckage seemed to be in this area the twisted and mangled wreckage all seemed to point towards a very large explosion at the time of sinking.

I had 5 minutes left. As I made my way further along I found a large deck gun sitting bolt upright, Andy had said the Zarefah would have been fitted with such a deck gun, the evidence was coming together nicely! As I moved off preparing to ascend I saw some of the other members of the team, they had found the telegraph which as I got closer could clearly see had a makers plate on it, just

what we needed. They were just in the process of starting to lift it, unfortunately I had to leave them to it, my time was up. I sent my DSMB up and slowly started to make my ascent.

My dive profile gave me a couple of deco stops and I took this opportunity to run through in my mind everything I had just seen. In my opinion I thought it was highly probable that this was HM Yacht Zarefah, and if that was the case I was really privileged to be the first person to see it in 85 years.

Once back on board Jean-Elaine and refreshed by one of Ronnie's brews I watched as one by one the marker buoys broke surface. I was obviously the only diver back on board at this stage and I was eager to find out what everyone else thought. As The first divers came to the surface Andy steered the boat towards them, The first were Andy Keys, Rob and Rachel, as we drew closer Andy keys was trying to shout something through his reg, he obviously couldn't make himself understood so he ripped his reg out and blurted out ''I've got the bell''. As they came aboard I found out that Andy had found the bell very early on in his dive, just sitting upright in the sand still on its hanger! Andy doesn't have lift bags he only 'borrows them' on this occasion he had no one to borrow one off so he struggled trying to carry it until he came across Rob and Rach who despite having used their bags on the telegraph,helped him get it to the surface.

As they unkitted Andy Cuth' and I took a look at the bell, it was a little encrusted so I tapped some of it away and started to rub the muck off. We could soon see letters appearing first the letter 'h' then 'fa' preceding it, it had to be! I worked back and tried to guess were the beginning would be, as soon as I started to clean that area the 'Z' came into view closely followed by 'are', we had it 'Zarefah'. After a little further cleaning it also revealed the date, '1905'.

This will probably always will be the highlight of my diving career, the good fortune continued for the rest of the week, the weather was superb even giving us the chance to get out to Sule Stack and do another little job for Andy. But that's another story!

On returning to Stromness a full report was submitted to the Receiver of Wrecks with a list of all items recovered. We requested that if they were in agreement the items should be donated to the local Lyness museum. I am pleased to say they were in agreement and as soon as preservation has been completed they should be on display.

The dive team members were as follows;

Gary Playfoot

Rob Bradley

Rachel Newman

Andy Keys

Phil Bennett

Andy Holland

Neil Coulson

Jenny Roscoe

Andy Hunt

Fiona Hunt

Nick

Greg

Scapa Flow Charters would like to thank Gary Playfoot for his time and effort on writing this report for us.

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