

A MILLION HOPES & DREAMS

Continuing on from last month's 'Blue Water Adventures'...

*Diving the M.V. Million Hope
and the tragic M.V. Salem Express.*

By James Neal

The Red Sea is home to many wrecks and her depths provide a veil of secrecy for so many tragedies. Perhaps none more so that the fateful loss of the M.V. Salem Express and the terrible loss of life that took place during a storm on the night of 16th December 1991.

Officially the ship was carrying 650 people, 578 passengers and 72 crew. In reality she was almost certainly carrying many, many more as she was returning from Mecca and she was reportedly overloaded.

She struck a reef, having gone slightly off course whilst taking a short cut, a decision that proved to be disastrous. Many of the victims remain within the

cabins below decks, for she went down very quickly as the impact with a reef forced her bow visor ajar and this allowed the sea to pour in. The ingress of seawater caused her electrically controlled doors to short circuit and many of the cabins were locked shut, their occupants trapped within. She immediately listed to starboard and sank in less than twenty minutes, taking several of the lifeboats to the bottom with her. Tragically there were only 180 survivors.

The Egyptian authorities recovered as many of the victims as they could and then sealed off sections of the wreck that were proving too dangerous to access. As a consequence diving the wreck can be considered a contentious issue, not all dive

operators will take you there. Virtually none of the guides will dive her and I don't know of any that will penetrate the wreck itself. Having said that, some operators

'I'm immediately swallowed by the blue waters and engulfed in bubbles from my entry into the depths!'

do take divers out to the site and she has become a very popular dive destination, as she is a spectacular wreck that provides a number of unique challenges.

side of the inflatable. I'm immediately swallowed by the blue waters and engulfed in bubbles from my entry into the depths.

I orientate myself and instinctively reach for my low-pressure inflator as I give it a couple of short blasts of air. Stabilised, I hover and get my bearings whilst running through my kit, performing a bubble-check and S-drill to ensure

everything is as it should be.

I can see the majestic vessel below me, lying on her starboard side in 30 metres



We took the Zodiacs across to the wreck and had to make a negative entry... I put the base of my hand on the Hollis 200LX reg and three fingers against my Oceanic Shadow mask and I pushed myself off the

of water. She's just over 100 metres long and rising almost 18 metres off the seabed. And she's absolutely stunning!

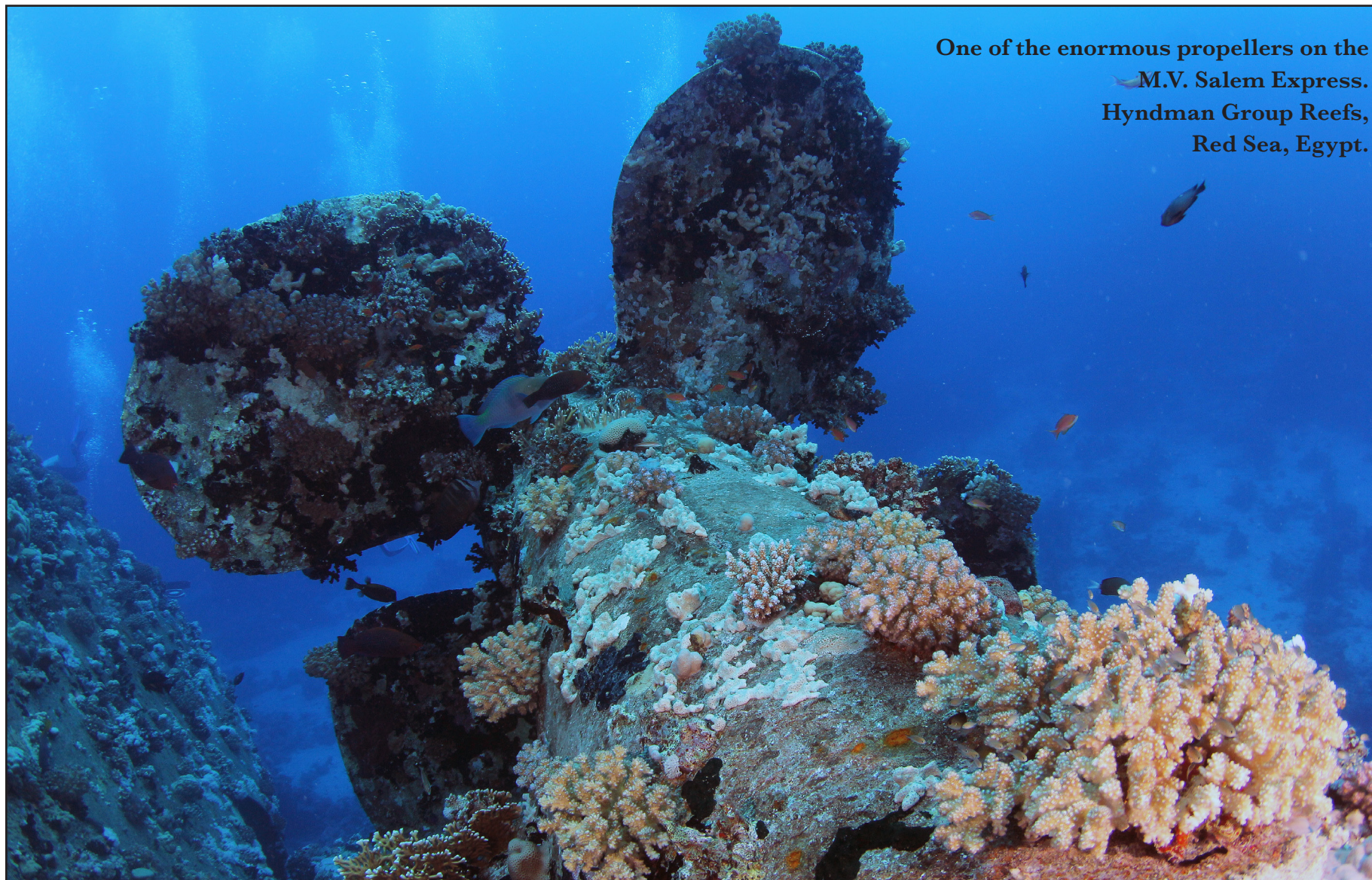
I kick towards her, taking full advantage

of the power from my Atomic Aquatic Blade fins, they propel forward with ease. I reach the port side, the highest part of the wreck, and head aft towards the huge screws that once drove her through the water. I take a number of shots of the enormous propellers and then drop over the edge and down to the stern.

Before me is a gaping hole, dark and foreboding. I glance at my group and check that they're OK to proceed and then I kick forward and lead them into the cavernous void that is the bowels of this mighty vessel. My Hollis canister torch cuts through the darkness and illuminates the carnage that lies before us. Nothing can truly prepare you for the Salem Express...

Stepping back in time to the late 1980s as I swim deeper into the heart of this tragedy. First we come across the many suitcases that are strewn across our path as we fin forward over the bottom that is the starboard wall. The further in we penetrate the darker it gets, the beam from my torch is like a bolt of lightning frozen in time, cutting through the blackness and thrusting it into light, and with that the realisation that we are indeed swimming through a tomb.

I'm diving sidemount, the Hollis Katana is perfectly trimmed, the ali cylinders sitting snugly against my torso, valves just below my armpits. The equipment feels good, I'm confident and comfortable, the 200LX regs deliver a reassuringly crisp flow of air with every breath, exactly what you want when diving in such a foreboding environment. I push forward...



One of the enormous propellers on the M.V. Salem Express. Hyndman Group Reefs, Red Sea, Egypt.

At the mid-way point there is a shaft of light that is an exit leading all the way back up to the port side of the vessel and provides a much needed exit for some. The rest of us continue onward, penetrating ever farther as it gets darker and darker.

At regular intervals I rotate the beam of my torch in a large circular arc, giving a clear OK signal to the small group of

divers that I'm leading, they all signal back and we continue forward...

It is now virtually pitch black and all around us are the remnants of personal possessions that are all oddly familiar and yet somehow strange. Everything is easily recognisable, cassette players, televisions, dolls, blankets and yet they send a shiver down the spine as you glide over them, each one has a tale of tragedy

that is unique to the individual who once owned it and who once had hopes and dreams of their own.

I can now see a slither of blue light ahead that seeps into the darkness. We are approaching the bows and this blue light is the mortal wound inflicted upon this once mighty ship.

The bow visor is ajar. Not enough to swim



M.V. Salem Express.
Hyndman Group Reefs, Red Sea, Egypt.

through, but enough to have let a torrent of seawater gush into the ship and send her to the bottom, I can clearly see the compartment before me, there's a strange vehicle in the far corner, some sort of tractor. There are cars on their sides covered in the remnants of the passenger's belongings, another shiver runs down my spine, an odd sensation that I'm being watched. The dark corners of this ghost ship hide their secrets well... I check my group, they're all OK, and we start the return journey back towards the stern.

I stop at the mid-way point once again, checking everyone's gas and making sure all are happy. They are, and so we continue retracing our path back towards the stern. Oddly noticing a great many more artifacts than I did on the way in.

A child's dress is lying before me, a stark reminder of the horror than unfolded onboard this ship and of the million hopes and dreams savagely snatched away in the dead of night on the fateful December's eve...

We exit the dark cavernous tomb and head around to the starboard side that is on the seabed and swim along the decks. Now that we're outside I'm happy to take photographs again, deciding that it wouldn't have been appropriate within the wreck itself. A token of respect for those that sadly lost their lives in such a terrifying manner.

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We head forward and come across the lifeboats, lying empty on the seabed. Their presence encapsulates the feelings that occupy my mind. The tragedy that surrounds this vessel is somehow enshrined in the hauntingly beautiful imagery that unfolds as you progress around her.



Moving forward we reach the bridge, penetrating through one of the windows near the seabed. I hang motionless in the water column, I then inject a short blast

'I'm being watched. The dark corners of this ghost ship hide their secrets well...'

of air into the Hollis Katana wing, just enough to increase the lift and let Boyle's Law start to work its magic as I gradually start to rise from the depths. Perfectly horizontal I commence my ascent up through the bridge heading towards the port side, I reach for the dump and release some of the ever-expanding gas, just enough to control my ascent rate,

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gradually shallowing until I reach the port side windows. I then arrest my ascent by dumping a little more gas and exit forward, heading across the forecastle towards the huge bow visor.

Swimming past the bow, out into open water, far enough to put enough distance between myself and the wreck to be able to turn back and see all of her magnificence! I take a couple of photographs and then fin back towards her.

Heading up across the bow visor I reach the anchor, lying lifeless on her side, encrusted. I continue up the forecastle to the port side rail where I am able to access the gangway that runs along the gunwale. I drop into it and swim along its length, exiting amidships.

It's time to make my ascent and complete my decompression obligations. I reach for the spool and DSMB that I'm carrying, unclipping it with my left hand, I release the 'blob' from its bungee and position the inflate hose between my fingers with the spool positioned between my thumb and index finger. With my right hand I remove my primary reg from my mouth and then blow hard into the oral inflation pipe, the DSMB expands as I vent the contents of my lungs into it.

As the blob expands it starts to tug for the surface, I replace my reg and simultaneously release the blob and let it skyrocket towards the heavens above, the spool spins frantically in my hand and the double-ended clip dances on the line. Eventually the spool ceases its frantic dance as the blob erupts from the water's surface and comes to a rest.



**The bow visor of the M.V. Salem Express.
She lies on her starboard side in 30 metres of water.**

I tighten the line and lock the spool with the dog-clip. Checking my computers, I then signal to the group to start to make our ascent.

I put a sharp blast of air into the Hollis Katana and inhale deeply from the 200LX regs, the added volume of gas being enough to commence the ascent. I exhale and start to wind the line in as the gas expands in the wing.

We reach six metres and arrest the ascent. Locking the spool with the dog-clip once again. I hover next to the spool as it hangs motionless in the water next to me.

I can see the entire wreck stretching out across the seabed below me, she looks magnificent. I can't help but think to myself just how peaceful and at rest she looks. I feel a twinge of sorrow as I complete my decompression and head

for the surface. The zodiac is waiting for us, I hand my camera up and then start to remove my kit. Every part of it has performed faultlessly and I have relished every moment of the dive.

Before I pull myself from the water I steal one final look back at the wreck, not knowing when I will see her again. I don't want to leave, wishing I could go back and do the dive all over again...

Surface intervals are an essential part of any day's diving and aside from anything else they give you the opportunity to discuss the dive, fill in your logbook and plan the next dive. For me they also provide the much-needed interval required to rest and engage in 'neurological fatigue management'.

Diving from a liveboard fits that requirement wonderfully and forces me into a routine that ensures that I take the required rest at regular intervals. As a consequence I can manage for the majority of the week, but I then pay a heavy price for about two weeks afterwards. A price I am generally happy

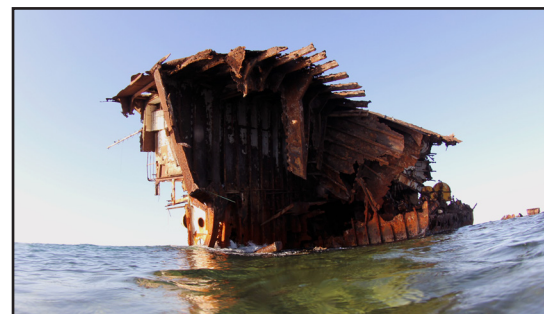
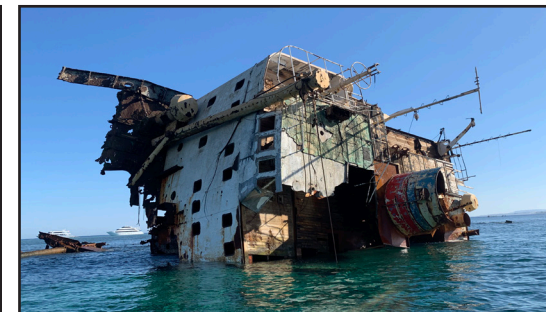
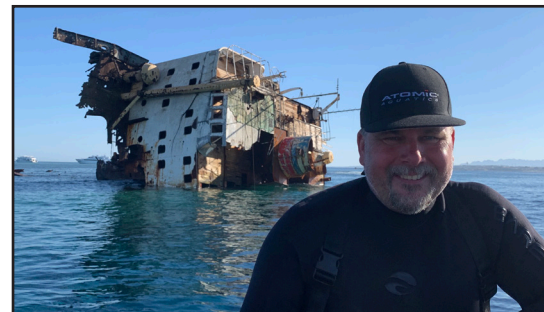


'Our merry band of international divers make up the 'Maru Diving Club'. A long story for another time perhaps.'

My brain injury dictates that I have to rest, there is no question about this, if I don't actively engage in fatigue management I will collapse.

One of the wrecks on this trip's itinerary was the M.V. Million Hope. She is one of the special request wrecks that I had negotiated as part of the diving package for the trip.

to pay in order to live the life I want to live, and I do believe that this attitude has fuelled my recovery thus far!



'The M.V. Loullia is an iconic wreck that's been stuck on Gordon Reef for almost 40 years!'

We particularly wanted to dive her because she was originally named the 'Ryusei Maru' and our merry band of international divers make up the 'Maru Diving Club'. A long story for another time perhaps.

The M.V. Million Hope is also the largest wreck in the Red Sea, she's a bulk carrier, 175 metres long, with five holds and four gantry cranes. She smashed into Nabq Reef in poor weather conditions on the morning of 20th June 1996.

She also benefits from being near to the wreck of the M.V. Loullia, Sharm El Sheikh. An iconic wreck that's been stuck on Gordon Reef for almost 40 years and one that I've wanted to visit for quite some time.

The wreck itself is precariously perched on the edge of the reef and she's been gradually eroded away by the wave action of the ocean over the years. She

makes for some sensational photographs and I've been itching to snorkel around her with my camera for years!

From the M.V. Loullia it's a short Zodiac trip to the wreck of the M.V. Million Hope. None of us had ever dived her before, not even the guides! As a result expectations were running high and you could feel the excitement build in the air!

As we approached the wreck site we could see parts of her mammoth superstructure protruding from the surface of the water. The waves smashed across her, surface conditions were a little lumpy to say the least and we initially wondered if we'd be able to get close enough to be able to get in and dive her. We started to kit up...

One of the M.V. Million Hope's massive
cranes sits on the seabed.
Nabq Reef, Red Sea,
Egypt.



The decision was made. We were going to try and dive her.



Once we were all kitted up and ready to dive the deckhand expertly maneuvered the Zodiac into position and gave the shout to 'go, go, go!'

I rolled off the side and made a negative entry in between the rolling waves that hurled themselves toward the mighty wreck. The first of which picked me up and tossed me around in its grasp until it decided that it had had enough and carried on its journey towards the shore without me.

Finally I was able to drop below the surge and free myself from the grasp of the crashing waves above, I orientated myself and was able to get my bearings, my head was still spinning! The wreck lay before me, stretching out across the seabed and towering up above. She was magnificent. She took my breath away; she was everything I had hoped for, and more!

It was a sight of epic proportions and one that would not be out of place in a Jules Verne novel. The wreckage had an almost Victorian feel to it and it somehow felt like I was making an incredible journey into an unknown world... I kicked towards the wreck and my Atomic Aquatic Blade fins cut through the water and propelled me towards her bulk.

I headed aft in search of the propellers and was instead treated to the most remarkable and unexpected sight. A solitary crane sat upright before us on the seabed. Strangely its twisted

and mangled wreckage didn't seem out of place. I took my time to photograph it, taking full advantage of the Hollis Katana's buoyancy characteristics that allow me to hover perfectly horizontal and just a couple of inches above the sandy seabed. I then moved back across the sand to the Hope, where we followed the

'The long growl of this ship's torture is in perfect unison with the waves that roll across her'

hull around to her stern and discovered that both her rudder and propeller had been removed by salvagers.

Heading forward we came across a section of the wreck that had been ripped apart by the reef. We were able to penetrate and swim through the bowels of this once mighty ship. I swam through the void between her outer plating and

her holds, along her web frame ribs, eventually exiting through a passage that dropped through the floor into another deck and out into the open sea where the ship had been torn in two. I then crossed her beam from port to starboard and exited from the twisted carnage at her bow, which lies on its starboard side.

From here I turned and headed aft, penetrating the wreck again from the smashed midships. I venture into the cavernous holds, the beam from my Hollis canister torch cutting through the inky black darkness.

I can hear something in the distance, a creaking groan and then silence. A moment later it repeats. Then silence again. As I get nearer the sound becomes more intense. There's an almighty clang



and then a long, low groan. And then silence again... I kick forward, another thunderous clang and that long, slow agonising groan, it's as if the ship itself is somehow in pain!

I exit from one of the aft holds and head back up towards the main deck, from



here and I am better able to ascertain where the noise is coming from and I head further aft in search of its source.

The long growl of this ship's torture is in perfect unison with the waves that roll across her. The source of her agony is a large steel door that is swinging back and forth with the surging waves. With every passing wave it swings closed with a thunderous clang and a laborious groan. The silence is the pause between waves as the door returns to its open position only to be thrust forward again as the next wave hurls itself towards the shore.

I'm mesmerised by this strangely exotic dance between the ocean and her partner. Their tango gives this wreck an eerie sense of foreboding and with each clang of her beating heart you can't help but feel drawn into her presence and

a sense that she is somehow alive and desperately clinging on to the last vestiges of her previous life.

It's time for us to leave her now and make our way towards the surface and the Zodiac that awaits. Finning back across her beam we head out into open ocean and away from the wreck, the beating of her groaning heart becomes fainter with each fin stroke until eventually I can no longer hear it.

I deploy my DSMB and reel up to six metres and complete my safety stop. I haven't clocked up any deco on this wreck as the depth and profile make it favourable and keep the NDL at bay. The surface conditions are still choppy and getting into the Zodiac is going to be fun!

Diving sidemount has its advantages, first and foremost is the ability to easily remove both of the cylinders whilst in the water. So when surface conditions become a little more challenging this really does help. I simply remove the right-hand side Hollis 200LX reg from around my neck, reach around my back and unclip the dog-clip that attaches the back of the cylinder to the Hollis Katana wing and then simply rotate the cylinder towards myself and this releases the bungee from the pillar valve. I then hand this cylinder up to the deckhand who lifts it into the Zodiac.

I then repeat this exercise with the left-hand cylinder, removing the necklaced 200LX from around my neck, reach back with the left hand and unclip the back of the cylinder and then rotate the cylinder towards me to release the bungee.



Hovering over the wreck of the M.V. Million Hope (Ryusei Maru).
Nabq Reef, Red Sea, Egypt.

With virtually all sidemount wings the weight is contained within a spine pouch that's built into the harness of the wing. This, in itself, is a great place to have it as it distributes the weight evenly. The downside is that in most cases it is not easily dumpable.

However, if the wing itself is easy to remove, which the Hollis Katana is, then this is less of an issue when trying

to remove the wing on the surface. I can easily get out my Katana and do so without giving it any thought. My fellow divers and buddies, however, have quite a struggle to get out of their kit and generally need assistance.

Over the next couple of weeks I will be completing the SDI Solo Diver course and then hopefully hardboat diving out of Swanage, returning once again to the

Valentine Tanks, this time with some newly qualified students. I've also yet to tell you all about some epic dives on the S.S. Rosalie Moller, the S.S. Carnatic and the S.S. Dunraven.

Next month I'll be wrapping up the Egypt trip and hopefully have some news to convey about our glorious UK shores. Fingers crossed for good viz and that we don't get blown out!