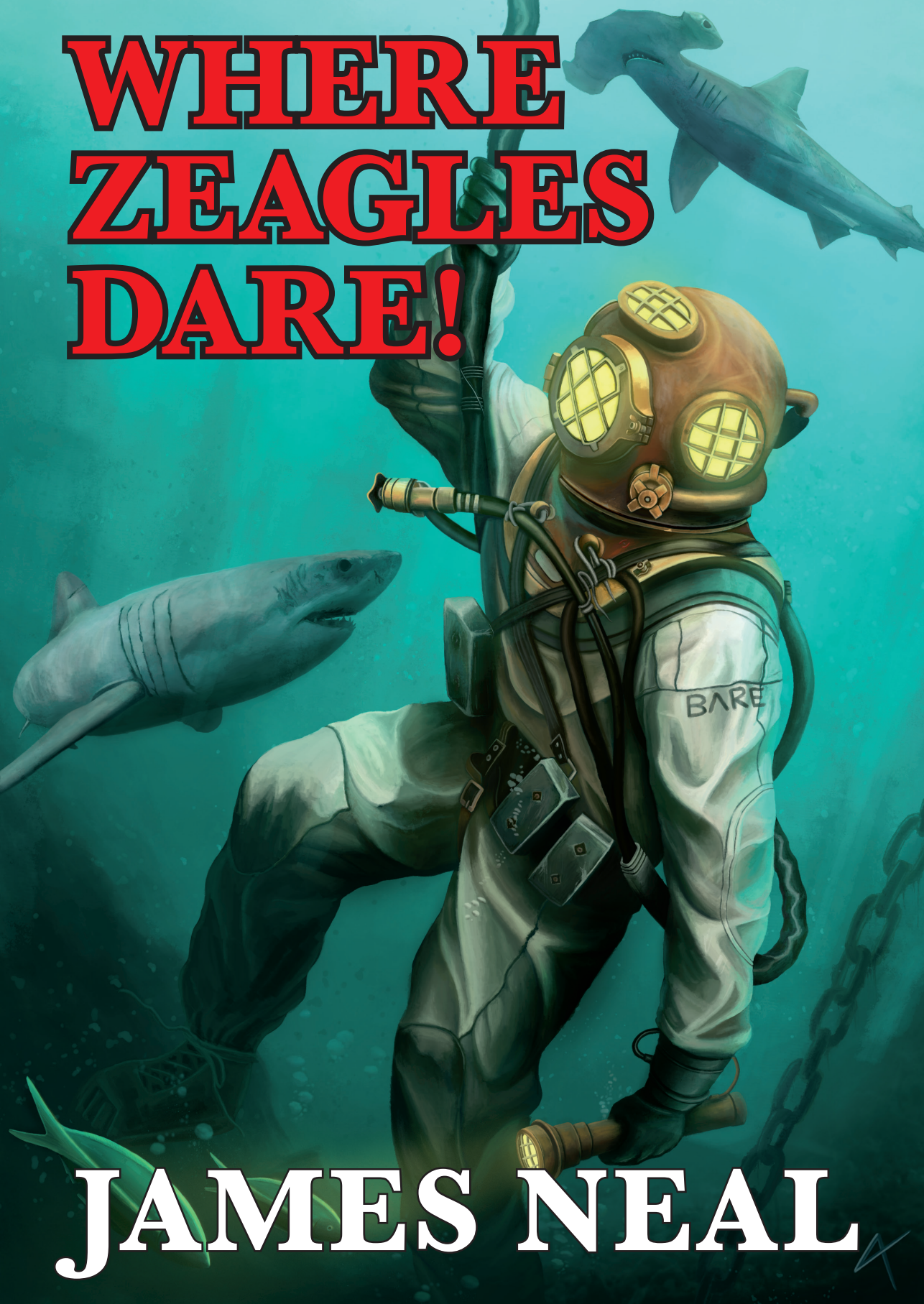


WHERE ZEAGLES DARE!



JAMES NEAL

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By James Neal

Cover image 'Where Zeagles Dare' by Alex Modro

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Prologue

Once a UK diver, always a UK diver.

I absolutely love being a UK diver. Especially an all year round UK diver, none of this 'dive season' nonsense for me. I also love the fact that I'm not quite right in the head, quite literally, and this helps with some of the dafter things I often find myself doing. Furthermore, I don't think I've actually grown up. And given the fact that I've just turned fifty I guess I'm no longer obliged to!

One of the things that I particularly like about being a UK diver is the whole sense of adventure associated with it. Nothing is really easy about it, it takes effort, planning, care and sometimes a great deal of hard work and sheer bloody mindedness just to get your kit to the water's edge! I love the whole 'big boys/girls adventure' thing when I go off with my mates on the latest crazy excursion!

Hodge Close and Holme Bank are two of my favourite dive sites, both are flooded mines and both are a 'proper adventure' just to get to, especially Hodge Close. As soon as anyone mentions either of these dive sites my eyes light up with excitement. The thought of having to get out the inflatable boat, to traverse the flooded tunnel, and the block and tackle, to lower the kit, just to get everything to the water makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up... I absolutely love it!

Having said all that, not every UK dive has to be hard work. Diving from the club RHIB off the coast tends to be relatively straight forward, likewise from a hard boat, and of course the majority of the inland sites make life a lot easier, especially when it comes to those all important training dives.

My 'go to' kit for teaching new divers tends to be a single cylinder, (300 bar 12L) configuration made up of a Zeagle wing coupled with a 3mm stainless steel backplate and harness. This is married to a set of mighty Atomic Aquatics M1 regs that I have rigged in the Hogarthian long hose, hog looped. I teach my students to understand both types of configuration and ensure that they recognise the value of each and how to respond with either in an emergency.

My exquisite BARE HDC Expedition dry suit has now become synonymous with me, I can't 'bare' to be without it. Sorry, couldn't resist... I did say earlier that I hadn't grown-up!

Seriously though, the BARE kit is simply in a class of its own. The SB base layers do an exceptional job of keeping me warm all year round and in some particularly harsh environments. Some of the mines can get bitterly cold and you don't want to find yourself an hour away from your exit and shivering!

I do have a heated vest, just in case, but with the SB system and base layers I rarely have to turn it on, even in the coldest of waters. And I'm talking 3 - 4 degrees!

The SB system is also extremely comfortable, it fits like a glove and is very supple and unrestrictive. Combined with the BARE HDC Expedition dry suit I find that I have an enormous amount of flexibility both in and out of the water.

I also have a pair of Zeagle Recon fins, and these things are just simply ace! I never thought I'd be able to replace my Jetfins with anything else, but the truth is the Recons are even better! They're a revolutionary fin, extremely powerful, they offer superb control and they're very heavy. I'm pretty confident that they're virtually indestructible!

On occasion I'm fortunate enough to get to test some of the very latest kit, recently I tried both the BARE Exowear gloves and the Zeagle Scope Mask. I didn't want to give either of these back. The Zeagle Scope is an extremely comfortable mask, with an impressive field of view, low profile and a wider nose pocket.



Having all the right kit for the job makes my life a whole lot easier. Whether I'm teaching in the pool, open water, pleasure diving, mine / cave, sidemount, backmount, rebreather. I have the right kit for the job!

Chapter One

Training, training and more training...

As far as I'm concerned Jacques Yves Cousteau has an awful lot to answer for, as does my friend Marcus, but that's another story. #MarcusMadeMe! I'll explain that another day. I promise.

I grew up in the 1970s with our television screen filled with images of fantastic, other-worldly adventures under the waves. That, and a healthy dose of Star Trek, Star Wars and Doctor Who pretty much ensured that my fate was sealed and that I was destined to become a diver (or Captain Kirk). No matter what. Or so I thought, aged eight and three-quarters!

But fate can be a cruel mistress... and it

wasn't until I turned eighteen and three-quarters that I found out that my asthma was a problem. A big problem, as I was unceremoniously told, "*Sonny, you can't dive, you never will. You're asthmatic, it's not safe.*" And that, back in the late 1980s and through the 1990s was the thinking.

Fortunately, things change, medicine moves on, sometimes opinions do too... and so I found myself on the island that is the gorgeous Dominican Republic. I was on my honeymoon and struggling to relax. My mind was used to running at full speed all of the time and I was lost with nothing to do... and then I saw it, the sign that beckoned. 'Learn to Scuba Dive Here'.

Temptation got the better of me and I had to talk to them, explaining how I'd always wanted to learn but never would because of my being asthmatic. As it turned out, that conversation was life-changing. I was indeed now allowed to scuba dive, the thinking had changed and I was declared 'fit to dive' by the local doctor. And so I completed my PADI Open Water course in the beautiful warm, blue waters, of the Caribbean.

“I was simply addicted from that moment. And I now know, and appreciate, that there is no cure!”

Rolling off the side of the Zodiac for the first time, after my pool training, is a memory that will be forever etched in my mind. A mix a pure fear and adrenaline, combined with a heap of excitement made for a heady cocktail. As Alistair Maclean wrote, 'Fear lent him wings', and in my case it was certainly one of the most exhilarating things I had ever done up until that moment. I also completed my first wreck dive, on the Atlantic Princess, and I was simply addicted from that moment. And I now know, and appreciate, that there is no cure!

What I didn't appreciate, at that time, was just how different UK diving was and how much 'training' would become a part of my life. I returned to the UK and sought out my local dive centre and a local club.

As many newly qualified divers discover,

it can be difficult to find a buddy that you can dive with, so like so many others, I found myself on the Advanced Open Water course in order to get in the water and progress beyond the 18 metre limit. Once that was completed I then did a number of courses in order to gain experience over the winter months in anticipation of the coming summer.

That first summer, all those years ago, was a real baptism! Gaining a great deal of experience, over many different dive sites along the South Coast, gave me a solid foundation on which to build. I was transformed from the naive holiday diver to a more hardened UK diver. But that transition took many hundreds of dives over several years, and I would argue that that journey and experience is still ongoing and will never truly end.

During those years I was exposed to a number of world-class instructors. Ian France, Garry Dallas, Paul Toomer, Oli Van-Overbeek, Mark Powell, Tim Clements to name but a few, I made it my mission to absorb and soak up as much as I could from them. When I then found myself training to become an instructor myself, I drew upon a great many tips and techniques that these guys had taught me. I can't thank them enough for sharing their expertise with me.

Equally, and in some cases, even more so. I learned some invaluable techniques from some less well known, but equally gifted, instructors that make their living

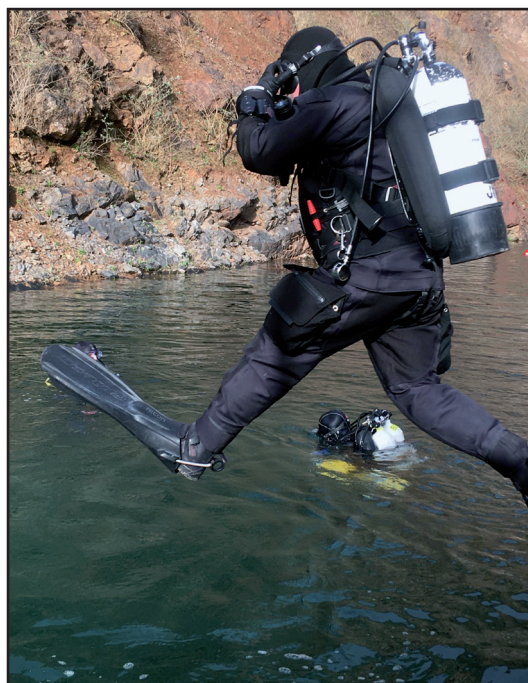
teaching day-in, day-out. My Course Director, Clive Albon, armed me with an arsenal of teaching techniques and a great many 'gems' that I still use on virtually every course I teach.

I think one of the most important things I was taught was that I should always try and think back to my first ever dive when I'm teaching an Open Water course, to cast my mind back to how anxious I felt, and then tell myself, 'that's how my student feels right now'. Being able to empathise with that initial trepidation and reduce any anxieties with a little good humour and encouragement has proved to be very useful and as a consequence a great many of my students have stayed in touch, done more courses, and even become good friends.

I have also come to appreciate just how important it is to train divers in the right equipment. And more often than not, the students will look at what their instructor is using. I like to keep my courses a little light hearted, it reduces the level of anxiety, so I often use a variety of sayings and repeatedly ask the same core questions to reinforce the learning, for example, 'Rule number one of scuba diving, is...?' and the students eventually start to come back with 'always breathe'. I also like to use a little humour to help get them to remember the essentials, so I tend to joke that rule number two of scuba diving is 'always look good!' This helps them to remember the all important rule number one. There's a very serious message, or 'lesson' behind

the technique. But having said that, it is important to look good... don't you think? You don't want your kit to look like a dog's dinner! It should most certainly fit properly and be comfortable.

I like to train my students to dive, from the outset, with a backplate and wing. I try my hardest to get them in trim from the beginning and aim to have them nice and flat by the end of the course. The aim is



to teach good diving habits from the start, so they don't have to 'unlearn' bad habits later. Like overweighting! Granted, you can only do so much in four or five dives, and a few hours in the swimming pool, but you can build the foundation and some students really do flourish. Others may struggle, and on occasion blame everyone else apart from themselves! I like to offer those students additional dives so that we can sort out any issues.

I like to teach the Open Water and Advanced Open Water courses in my Zeagle backplate and wing. I've added a crotch strap to the harness and, whilst I prefer a one-piece harness, I do find the addition of the quick releases to be particularly useful when teaching. It takes an awful lot of 'faff' out of things.

The harness is extremely comfortable and you 'hang' from it nicely.

I have also added a D-ring to either side of the waist band to facilitate clipping on a bail-out cylinder and a reel with DSMB. By it's very nature the buoyancy characteristics of the wing pushes you forward in the water and therefore it lends itself naturally to the delta position. It has a nice large pull toggle on the kidney dump and the simple 'donut' design works well. The backplate itself is 3mm stainless steel. Its simplicity is its beauty and I find it works particularly well when I also carry a bailout cylinder when teaching below 18 metres or in the winter when the water temperature is particularly cold.

The 3mm backplate has some weight to it. As do the Zeagle Recon fins. I find that the weight of the fins really helps with the trim,

I also find that the weight of the 300 bar cylinder is of benefit, and I like to have the extra gas, just in case! In freshwater, this configuration allows me to dive with just 4 kilos of added lead.

The Recon fins themselves are simply superb. I particularly like the large finger hole on the straps that allows you to don

and doff them with ease and the foot pockets are nice and wide and easily allow for rock boots.

Again, this is of real benefit when teaching, as I am able to kit up quickly and easily, but one of the biggest advantages of these fins is the shear power that they offer the diver in the water. I am able to

propel myself through the water with both great speed and little effort. Many of my students, especially my Divemaster candidates, have gone out and bought themselves a pair of Zeagle Recon fins having seen for themselves what mine are like. I'm always happy to lend mine out, so if any of you want to give them a try, just shout!

Now, let's talk about some real diving...





Chapter Two

Broadsword calling Danny Boy...

For me, a weekend's diving generally starts from the moment I get in the 'Dive Wagon' and turn the key. And it doesn't end until I park up when I get back home three or four days later. It's not just about the diving, it's the whole thing, the company, the laughs, the fish and chips, the ice cream, the curry, I just relish every single second of it.

More often than not I have the task of picking up the RHIB and towing it down to the south coast. I really don't mind this at all, it makes the journey that much more interesting and I usually end up having some company during the drive down. I tend to go and get the boat on a Friday afternoon, after having loaded

up my own kit, and usually on my own. I get it hitched up, remove the cover, connect the trailer board, test the lights... fix the lights, happens every time! And then head out for the motorway and our pre-arranged meeting point, usually at a friend's house en route. Load up more kit and then there's something of a routine for the drive down, get the truck fuelled up, head south until we get to Taunton. At this point I either leave the motorway at junction 25 and head for any of a number of coastal destinations or I go past and stop at the next motorway services for a coffee and a break. Once refreshed it's back on the motorway and onwards, usually to Plymouth's Mount Batten Quay.

I like to travel down early on a Friday for a number of reasons, but mainly to manage the neurological fatigue that I suffer from. It gives me the opportunity to travel at a leisurely pace, hopefully avoiding the worst of the traffic and then I can get the boat unhitched and parked. Get myself checked-in to the hotel and relax for a couple of hours before the rest of the gang arrive.



Our Friday evening usually consists of a trip across to the Barbican via the ferry and a fabulous meal at the 'Himalayan Spice' Indian restaurant. If you haven't yet discovered this restaurant... you must try it! It's then back to the hotel for an early night and a good sleep.

Breakfast is the first order of the day and then we get the RHIB loaded with everyone's kit and launch it. The Dive Wagon and the trailer then get parked and I get on board and take the helm. It's standard practice to notify

'Every time I depress the button on the RHIB's radio handset I have to fight the urge to say 'Broadsword calling Danny Boy', come in, over!'

the coastguard of our intentions for the day. Every time I depress the button on the RHIB's radio handset I have to fight the urge to say 'Broadsword calling Danny Boy, come in, over'. (Google it, if you don't get it!)

We make our way through the sound and out past the breakwater. Then I push the throttle forward, lift the engine and adjust the trim tabs and she's on the plane and hurtling across the wave tops. My senses are now treated to the thrill of every possible sensation all at once. The wind is in my hair, the spray is in my face and the scream of the engine fills my ears as the hull pounds across the crests of the waves. I'm loving every second of this. I'm in my happy place now.

As we reach Rame Head I ease off the throttle just enough to smooth out the ride as we round the headland, where it tends to be a little 'lumpy', then it's back on the taps and lifting the bow clear of the water as we charge for Whitsand Bay. Our destination, the wrecks of both the S.S. James Eagan Layne and the HMS Scylla. Both ideal sites for the less experienced diver and perfect for them to gain valuable experience.

Using the RHIB's GPS and fish finder I locate the first wreck and give the shout



*'...the ocean
out its volu*

to throw the shot over the side. The rope snakes its way out from the forward compartment and dances over the port side tube as it makes its mad dash down to the inky depths below.

Kitting up on a rocking RHIB isn't always the easiest thing to do. I'm

grateful for the fact that the Zeagle rig is a doddle to get into, even if the boat is trying to do its utmost to breakdance beneath me!

I'm ready to go. Waiting for my buddy to finish kitting up, I take the extra time to ensure my camera is set-up and clipped

*n grasps the wing and squeezes
me into the surrounding water,
it's buoyancy decreasing as
the waves engulf me!*



on. Buddy checks completed, we get ready for the shout as the cox expertly manoeuvres the RHIB into position.

I strain to hear through the hood, the engine throbbing next to me, the cox turns and hollers, 'Go, Go, Go!' And with that I push myself backwards off the side of

the RHIB and into the frigid water. I kick and spin myself around and pop back to the surface, catching sight of the cox as he's pointing in the direction of the shot, I fin against the waves as they conspire to whisk me out to sea. I reach the shot and grab hold. My buddy is right behind me. I check that he's happy and give the thumbs down to descend. As I depress the deflate on the Zeagle wing the air erupts from the dump as the ocean grasps the wing and squeezes out its volume into the surrounding water, it's buoyancy decreasing as the waves engulf me! I look up at the exact moment that the she swallows me whole, snatching a last glimpse at the sky just as the waters wash over my mask.

Turning, I pull myself down the shot to six metres, there I stop. I check that my buddy is still with me and we run through a quick bubble check, then I signal 'thumb down' and I start to pull myself down the shot with my left hand, camera in my right, I allow Boyle's law to work its magic as the wing continues to lose its lift as the gas within is compressed, my descent getting easier and easier.

Soon the exposed ribs of the mighty James Eagan Layne appear from the gloom, I inject just enough gas into my wing to arrest my descent, hovering over the wreck I orientate myself and signal our direction of travel. We work our way into the bowels of the wreck and head aft. Picking my way through the carcass of this once mighty Liberty Ship. I want to ensure that my buddy has a cracking dive, he's never dived this wreck before

and I'd like to make sure that it's one for him to remember. We continue pushing aft, I'm able to get a couple of reasonable photographs but there's a lot of 'snot' in the water and whilst the visibility isn't bad, it isn't great either. Typical UK diving really.

Moving on, we explore a little further, having a good rummage around inside the wreck, eventually we're greeted by the seabed and the smashed stern. We turn back, checking gas, and make our way back towards the bow. Swimming back through the cavernous gaping void of this once mighty ship's infrastructure is simply great fun. My buddy is grinning like a little kid and my job is done!

Ultimately we reach the bows and take a quick tour around them as they tower up from the seabed and can easily be penetrated through her port side. Once back within the relative shelter of the bow, her upper decks now gone, I deploy a DSMB from within and we start to make our way up to six metres, I snatch a final glance back at the wreck as she disappears back into the gloom, and we continue up to complete our safety stop.

Breaking the surface, I can see the RHIB no more than 30 metres away, we signal that we're OK and she heads towards us. It's now that I'm really grateful for those quick releases on the Zeagle harness, I inject a short blast of extra gas into my BARE Expedition dry suit in order to give me some additional buoyancy and then disconnect the inflator, as I grab

the side of the RHIB with my left hand I unbuckle the waist and let the crotch strap drop away, I then squeeze the pinch release on my left shoulder with the right hand, the harness springs open, I switch and grab hold of the RHIB with the other hand as the rig slips over my right shoulder and I offer it up to one of my friends on the RHIB who pull it up over the side of the tube and stow it. I then repeat the same process with my harness and hand this up, the added buoyancy of the air in my dry suit ensuring that I remain safe should my hand slip from the security of the RHIB's lifeline. I then haul myself up and over the side of the tube and back into the RHIB.

It's now time to relax and enjoy our surface interval as the next buddy pair dive. I return to the role of cox, as I'm one of two qualified to do so on board. Once the others are in the water I keep a vigil on their position and ensure that we don't drift too far away. It's a time to enjoy the sunshine, reflect on the dive and let the body eliminate some of the excess nitrogen that remains within its tissues. After approximately 40 minutes the DSMBs hit the surface and I pick-up the other pair of divers and then we retrieve the shot.

It's now time to reposition for our second dive and we head the short distance across Whitsand Bay to the wreck of HMS Scylla. Once again I give the shout to drop the shot over the side and it makes its mad dash to the depths below, hitting the wreck on the port side, slightly aft of amidships, perfect!

Kitted-up I glance across at my buddy to see how he's doing, he's ready and we run through the pre-dive safety checks. Our cox positions the RHIB and the shout goes out for us to roll-off, I push myself backwards and once again the crisp green waters envelope me.

Bobbing back up to the surface and the light of day I orientate to the shot and kick towards it, grasping at the rope I hold on as the current tugs against me in its effort to sweep me away. I give my buddy the signal to descend again and then pull against the shot once more heading down, we complete another bubble-check before continuing down to the frigate that lies on the seabed below.

HMS Scylla was sunk in 2004 as an artificial reef and since then she has become a

haven of life and is literally smothered in an astonishing array of species, Spiny Starfish, Scallops, Mussels, Anemones, Hydroids, Sea Squirts, Urchins, Dead Man's Fingers, Sea Beards and Sea Fans festoon the wreck and with that an array of fish, Wrasse, Pollock, Bib and Cod can all be seen.

We're hovering over the main deck, just behind the bridge, I take us across to the port rail and then over the side, dropping to the seabed, we had aft to the stern. My

plan is to give my buddy a good tour of the wreck and to hopefully get a decent photograph of him at the bow.

We swim under the wreck itself and in between the two rudders that sit on the seabed, then looping back up around the stern we ascend to the main deck and follow the port walkway forward. Amidships there are plenty of hatches that allow access to the the interior of the wreck, I take my buddy forward to the



main bridge and we enter from one of the forward windows. A quick glance around reveals several passageways off, many of which I have explored extensively in the past. We exit through a large hole in the roof of the bridge and continue forward as planned towards the bow.

There's a very specific shot that I would like to try and get. We inch our way over the deck, picking our way forwards and there it is... the anchor chain stretching out from the bow

down towards the seabed, it makes for an interesting shot. I show my buddy where and how to position himself, and then I make my way further down the anchor chain, getting the angle of the shot that I want.

If you want to become a true master of buoyancy control, then buy yourself a camera. You'll no doubt become the last person on board that anyone wants to dive with, but you will soon learn zen-like buoyancy control!

The characteristics of the Zeagle wing enable me to position myself in the water column with ease and then by using simple breath-control I can adjust my position up or down accordingly, by simply breathing in and out. The Atomic Aquatics MIs deliver the gas smoothly and I go about the business of hopefully getting a decent shot without having to worry about my kit.



I take several shots, making a few minor adjustments to both my position in the water column and to the camera. I appreciate the level of comfort that my equipment affords me, I can concentrate on my camera and the shots that I'm trying to get and not have to overly concerned about anything else, save for periodically checking both mine and my buddy's gas.

At seventy bar it's time to head back towards the bridge, retracing our path across the deck, I get my reel and DSMB ready to deploy as we near the bridge. We position ourselves opposite each other and I launch the DSMB skyward as the reel spins frantically and the line plays out at a dizzying pace, the 'blob' erupts from the depths and comes to a rest, I take up the slack, tighten the line and 'thumb' the dive. Taking a deep breath in, my ascent starts as the volume of gas in my lungs expands, I exhale and start to wind in the slack as we head back up towards the surface. Once again I take a last look back at the wreck before she disappears from sight and slowly we make our way back to the surface.

Once the other group have had their dive we make our way back to the marina, we then get the RHIB back onto the trailer and unload all of our kit. The boat is washed down with fresh water and all of the

electrics are reattached. Then we need to take care of our stomachs, we're all ravenous, next stop is the fish and chip shop! Having refuelled ourselves, it's time for the long drive home, heading back up the motorway as the day draws to a close and the darkness of night creeps in we put some tunes on, kick back and let the miles clock by... a perfect end to another glorious diving weekend with friends!



‘A real humdinger. The best yet.’

Cromhall Gazette

WHERE ZEAGLES DARE

‘There is a splendid audacity about Where Zeagles Dare in which a handful of British divers invade an impenetrable ship wreck... Neal offers a real dazzler of a tale, with vivid action, fine set pieces of suspense, and virtuoso display of startling plot twists, whilst demonstrating that he really doesn’t take himself too seriously!’

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