

SAVED BY THE BELL!

A team of international technical divers has successfully raised one of the bells from the wreck of the bullion ship RMS Niagara in New Zealand. In the face of significant difficulties and numerous setbacks, the expedition led by Australian diver Craig Howell, finally salvaged the bell and other artifacts 67 years after the famous liner was sunk by a German mine outside Auckland harbour.

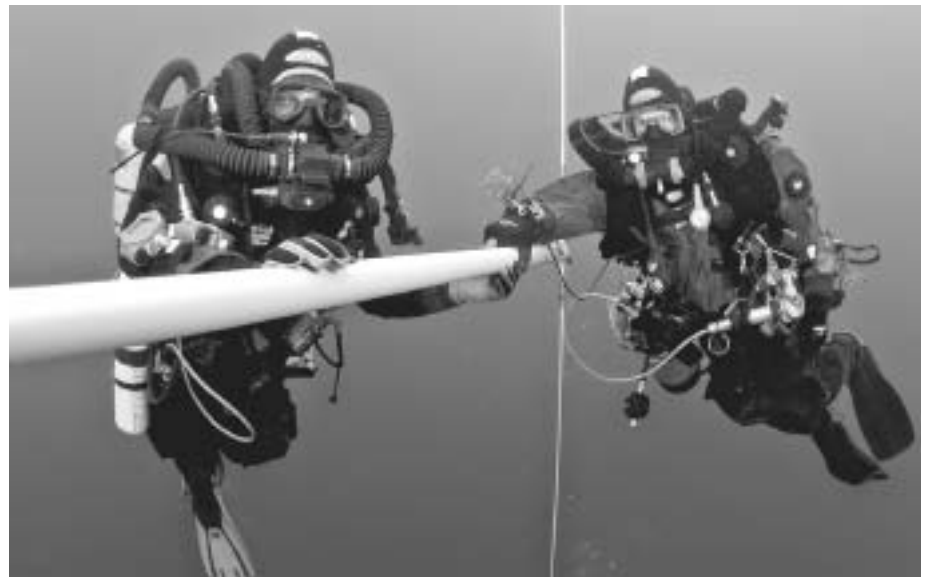
The nine divers from Australia, Wales and England met up in the Northland town of Tutukaka for a 10 day charter to dive the wreck which lies in depth of 120m to the northeast of the Hen and Chicks Islands. Australian divers Craig Howell, John Dalla-Zuanna (JDZ), Dean Chamberlain, Dave Apperley, Andrew McIntosh, Craig Challen and Richard Harris were joined by the wreck's first free swimming diver Tim Cashman from Wales, and well known deep wreck photographer Leigh Bishop from England. On-site logistics and access to the wreck were organised by local historian and diver Keith Gordon of SeaROV Technologies.

For Keith Gordon, the wreck has been a long time obsession. He first peered at the wreck through the eyes of an ROV in 1988, and was then involved in organising the first tech dive on the wreck by Tim Cashman and Dave Apperley in 1999. Despite multiple expeditions visiting the wreck

since 1999, she has been slow to give up her secrets. Poor weather over the site and logistical problems have meant that only 12 divers have performed a total of 23 dives in all that time.

The 2007 expedition entitled "NZTech07" set out to achieve 2 main objectives: To safely explore and enjoy the wreck, and if possible to locate and recover one of the ship's bells. But this trip was to be no different to the others before it. From the start it was plagued by a variety of problems. Support divers had to pull out because of other commitments or family crises. On the first dive on the wreck divers encountered a strong current and terrible visibility below 80m, seeing most of them cut short their dive in the poor conditions. On the return trip the charter boat suffered a catastrophic engine failure causing the boat to fill with steam, cracking the heads on the engine and rendering it unserviceable for the rest of the trip! One of the divers suffered a minor episode of decompression sickness and narrowly escaped a trip to the local chamber.

On a new boat the next day, the hotline had drifted just off the wreck and 4 divers spent several hours decompressing after a 120m sand dive! Then a cyclone to the NW of New Zealand brought record rains, flooding and mud slides to the region along with gale force winds which



kept the team landlocked for several days! Would they ever get to properly dive this wreck!?

With just two days before the end of the expedition, the weather suddenly broke and they jumped at the opportunity to get out. Welsh diver Tim Cashman had attempted to get down to Auckland to fly home the day before, but the road closures had prevented his escape! He declared this a good omen and decided to dive again instead of leaving! Now on our new charter "Perfect Day" from Dive Tutukaka, the team steamed out to the wreck in sunny conditions, but with a 3m swell persisting.

Locating the wreck and dropping the shot went smoothly. JDZ and Craig Challen dived first and tied in the grapnel. Craig Howell and Harry were next in, swimming over to the wreck from the shot in lowish viz but no current. Reaching the Niagara near the forward hold, they turned aft until they reached the enormous foremast. Heading out along the sand they swam underneath the mast admiring the large crows-nest, and some mast head lights on the sand. Harry paused to photograph these when suddenly he heard Craig squealing in his helium falsetto. Right in front of them on the sand, sitting up like Jackie, was the ship's bell! An exchange of unintelligible chatter followed! Harry raced to photograph the bell in situ but Craig was already

deploying a lift bag and attaching it to this most sought after prize. Minutes later, the bell began its ascent to the surface and the pair spontaneously embraced and renewed their excited babble! Two passing divers could only hear the hysterical squawking emerging from a cloud of silt, and did not realize what had transpired!

Soon after, one of the ship's telegraphs followed the bell to the surface and the sounds of the ship's horn above let all the divers' know that the two prizes were safely onboard the Perfect Day.

And so after numerous difficulties, the team fulfilled its main objectives. Another dive the next day made it the most successful expedition to the Niagara to date. Three exceptionally important artifacts were raised (including the ship's Walker's Trailing Log) and these will be conserved and displayed in the maritime museum in Auckland. If ever a trip was saved by the bell, it was this one!

A more comprehensive article on the Niagara expedition and the exploration of the Pearse Resurgence by the NZTech07 team will soon appear in Sport Diving Magazine.

NZTech07 would like to thank the following for their sponsorship or assistance: Dive Rite Australia, Otter Dry Suits, Typhoon International, DiveTek Australia, Sport Diving Magazine and Barry Andrewartha, Pelican Australia, Golem Gear, Neil Miller and DiveOz, Seaoptics Australia, TDI Australia, Submerge Scooters, Pacific Hideaway Charters, Dive Tutakaka, SeaRov Technologies, all the support divers and countless other helpers!



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