

Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010

It was a perfect day. The summer sun shone brightly and the tranquil delights of the Normandy coast beckoned. Casting off the shackles of day to day living ten divers from Southsea SAC and the Buccaneers assembled in the pretty Norman town of Port-en-Bessin to enjoy seven long hot days filled with great diving, crisp local Cider and amazing seafood - in short "La vie Norman". A fishing port for hundreds of years, Port en Bessin still ranks as the seventh largest fishing port in mainland France.



Port en Bessin harbour

During the D-Day invasion, the British wanted to create a major P.L.U.T.O (Pipeline under the Ocean) terminal at Port en Bessin, but first it had to be captured and held. In a daring raid, men from 47 Commando Royal Marines succeeded in capturing the port and holding it despite fierce German resistance and the loss of 68 men. A poignant memorial to their courage and tenacity now overlooks the harbour.



47 Commando RM memorial

Away from the harbour the town slips quietly away into a maze of narrow lanes and pretty side-streets brightly decorated with tubs of Hydrangeas and Fuchsias.



Port en Bessin



Port en Bessin

Reminders of the town's long association with the sea are never far away and no better demonstrated than in the parish church of Saint-Andre.

The present church was built in the 1890's but if the wall plaques are to be believed there has been a church in the town since at least 1457.

Cider and shipwrecks *Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010*



St Andre church



Seafarers' memorial – St Andre church

Once inside the town's maritime past comes to life with models of ships adorning the walls to keep them safe and marble memorials to remind everyone that despite man's best efforts seafaring is a still very dangerous occupation.



St Andre church



Seafarers' memorial - harbour

Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010

In perfect conditions we began our diving adventures with a leisurely morning motor out to the wreck of HMHS (HM Hospital Ship) Amsterdam located some 5 miles north east of Arromanches.

Built in 1930 for the London and North Eastern Railway company the SS Amsterdam initially operated as a cross channel ferry on the Harwich to Hook of Holland route.

A large ship she was 350ft long with a 50ft beam weighed 4220 Grt and had room for 450 1st class and 100 2nd class passengers.



SS Amsterdam - pre conversion

In 1944 she was refitted at Southampton and on D-Day ferried the US 2nd Rangers to the infamous cliffs at Point du Hoc where their outstanding gallantry would secure their place in history. Following D-Day she returned to England and was again refitted this time as a Hospital ship.

On 7th August 1944 she left Juno beach with 315 wounded and a number of German POWs. Shortly afterwards she hit two mines and immediately began to settle. Heroic actions by the nursing staff ensured 258 of the wounded were safely evacuated but sadly 55 of the wounded together with 30 crew, 10 RAMC staff and 15 POWs died when she finally sank 11 minutes after the initial explosions.

We found her upright but heavily broken in a general sea bed depth of 27 meters at high water and with 6+ meters visibility and good light penetration she was a pleasure to dive.

The site teemed with life, large schools of sea Bass and some huge lobsters bearing testament to the success of the strict “no take” rules enforced in this part of France.



HMHS Amsterdam



HMHS Amsterdam

Cider and shipwrecks

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Large recognizable sections of the ship's machinery were easily found including a massive flywheel used to help power her equally impressive crankshaft



HMHS Amsterdam - bollards



HMHS Amsterdam - flywheel



HMHS Amsterdam - crankshaft

En-route to our second dive site we took the chance to have lunch inside the remains of the famous Mulberry harbour at Arromanches.

Most of us had dived the Phoenix units at Selsey and Langston which locked together to make up a section of Mulberry, but we were all impressed with the sheer size of the completed units.



Arromanches town



Arromanches Mulberry units



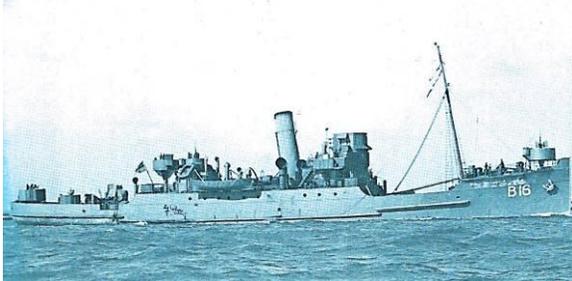
Arromanches Mulberry units

Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010

Our second dive was on another former ferry with Hampshire connections. This was HMS Fratton, a 757Grt ship built in 1925 for the Southern Railway Company who used her as a cross channel ferry on their Dover/Folkstone to Calais routes.

Always a workhorse, in 1942 she helped evacuate the Channel Islands garrison and on D-Day was used as a Bombardon control ship with the job of coordinating the activities of the ships laying bombardon breakwater units (like the one in Portland harbour) to ensure the Mulberry units were protected from the waves as much as possible.



HMS Fratton

In late June 1944 she returned to the UK for a refit returning in August as an "Examination" ship. In this role her job was to board and inspect all merchant ships found in her operational area to ensure no supplies likely to assist the enemy were allowed through.

On 18th August she was 2-3 miles north of Arromanches when an acoustic mine detonated under her stern. She sank in 15 minutes with the loss of 30 of her 68 man crew.

She now lies fairly flat and heavily broken on a sand sea bed with a general depth of 18 meters at low water.

The site is covered in all sorts of life; lobsters, crabs and muscels with make help make this a very pretty and interesting dive.



HMS Fratton



HMS Fratton



HMS Fratton

Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010

Day 2 saw us heading west to the D-Day LST/LSI holding areas north of Omaha and Utah beaches in brilliant sunshine and more mirror flat seas.

On the way we were lucky enough to see a Sun Fish which obligingly stayed around the boat for quite a while whilst we marveled at this most weird fish.



Sun Fish

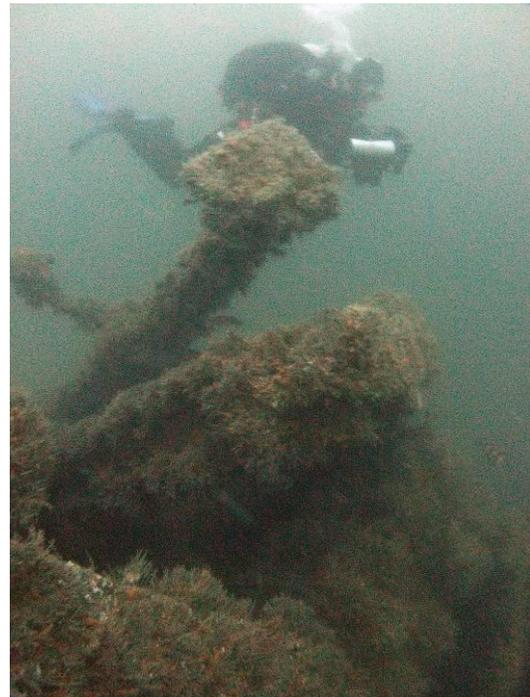
Arriving on station our first dive was on a German minesweeper the M39.

Not much was known about his particular ship except that she was a M35 type minesweeper which was the most numerous type in the Kriegsmarine and like all in her class didn't have a name just a number.

We found her lying on her port side at almost 90 degrees to the sand sea bed. She appeared fairly intact with her large starboard four bladed propeller still visible as were her double rudders. Her port propeller appeared to be buried in the sea bed.



M39



M39

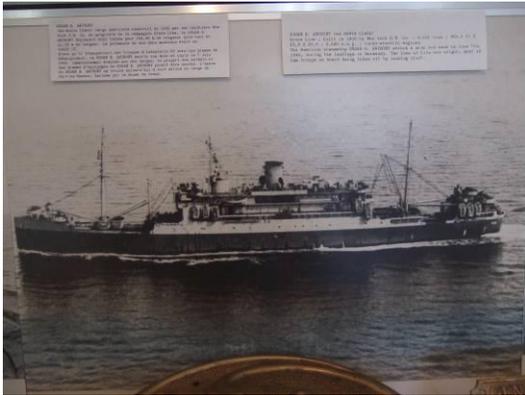
Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010

Our second dive took us to the Susan B Anthony, one of the truly iconic D-Day wrecks.

Built in 1930 for Grace Shipping in the USA this 8183 Grt cargo/passenger liner was originally named the Santa Clara. Transferred to the US Navy in 1942 she was re named the Susan B Anthony after a prominent US women's rights campaigner and then used as a troop/supply ship in the North African campaign (Op Torch).

On D-Day she was transporting 2200 US soldiers from Newport (IOW) to Omaha beach when she hit a mine. Miraculously all the soldiers and crew escaped the ship unharmed before she sank.



Susan B Anthony 1943

We found her lying on her port side at approximately 90 degrees to the sea bed in a general depth of 28 meters at low water however her starboard rail rises to about 20 meters.

Again the site is covered with life which coupled with the presence of her guns, cargo and numerous artifacts makes this a great dive all round.



Susan B Anthony bow gun



Susan B Anthony port foredeck gun



Susan B Anthony

Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010



Susan B Anthony stbd foredeck gun

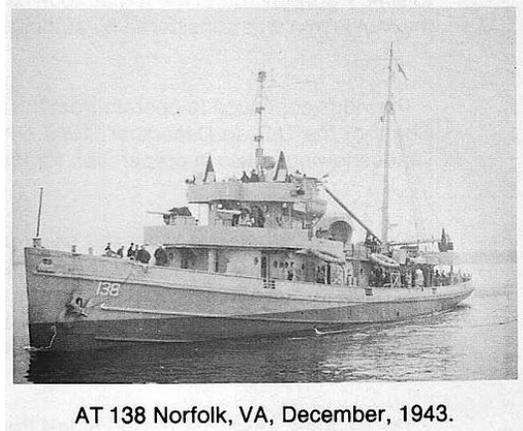


Susan B Anthony foredeck area

Day 3 saw us back in the area of Omaha beach this time to dive a real “unsung hero” of a ship which who’s luck finally ran out when she was torpedoed by an E Boat 3 miles north of “bloody” Omaha beach.

The USS Partridge was a Lapwing class minesweeper built for the US Navy in 1918. Too late for WW1 she saw most of her pre war service in the Pacific. In 1941 she was transferred to the US East coast, refitted as an ocean going tug and re designated as AT 138. In that role she was undertook a number of notable rescues of ships torpedoed by U boats off the North Carolina coast.

In 1944 she was transferred to the UK to assist with the delivery of Whale bridging units to Omaha beach and it was whilst undertaking those duties on 11th June 1944 she was torpedoed and sunk without loss of life.



AT 138 Norfolk, VA, December, 1943.

We found her very flat and broken lying in a general depth of 32 meters at high water.

Nevertheless this was a really lovely dive as the site is covered with life and there’s still plenty of metal left to keep the “tin heads” happy

Cider and shipwrecks
Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010



USS Partridge – boiler



USS Partridge



USS Partridge



USS Partridge – engine assembly

Our second dive was on an unknown wreck i.e. one that no diver diving from Channel Diver had ever dived before.

The excitement of diving unknown wrecks is always high and this dive was no exception. Would it be a gem – an upright warship/freighter all intact with a bell nearby or a dud – just a pile of old wire. The only way to find out was to dive it.

Dropping down the shot we found the site at 26 meters. It was a large rectangular structure divided into at least 12 fairly shallow rectangular compartments with no obvious bow or propellers or any mooring bollards.



USS Partridge

Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010



Unknown - ?barge.

To one side we found the remains of a vehicle axle with a differential housing and two wheels fitted with heavy duty X-country type tyres.



Unknown – barge

Littered around the site were pairs of blue heavy duty rubber gloves similar to those used historically by commercial divers.

We believe this was the wreck of a fairly modern diving/work platform or barge.

Day 4 took us back east to a WW1 casualty lying some 10-15 miles north of Arromanches.

The Barsac was a French merchant ship built in 1902 for Chant Navigation of Anversois. She was 260ft long with a 30ft beam and weighed 1800 tons. She was sunk on 11/01/1918 by a torpedo fired by UB80 whilst transporting a cargo of Nickel ore to Le Havre.

This was very dark dive with almost no natural light and some current. The wreck lies upright in 40 meters of water at high water on a sandy sea bed with a deep scour along her starboard side.

The bow rises about 10meters from the sea bed. On the bow is a stack of reasonable small caliber gun ammunition (about 3" size) but no sign of the gun mentioned in Mark James' D-Day wreck book.



Unknown - ?barge.



Unknown – barge

There also appeared to be the remains of a hydraulic ram and possible jib assembly inside one of the collapsed watertight compartments

Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010



SS Barsac – picture by Richard HOBSON

Due to a combination of Bastille Day festivities, spring tides and worsening weather diving activities on days 5 and 6 were limited to one inshore dive per day. The site chosen for both days was another “unknown” generally to the west of Port en Bessin.

We found the site at 29 meters. Visibility was poor with significant current on both dives.

The wreck was that of a large vessel sitting upright on the sea bed with slab sides which rose some 4 meters from the sand.

The metal deck area was generally flat with very large mooring bollards and possibly lashing points fixed to it. At one end, the deck area curved round in a “soft” arc which intersected with another vertical soft arc of metal which led back to the sea bed. This area had the appearance of a rounded bow.

Assuming this to be a bow there was a very large hole on the starboard side which gave access to an apparently empty space under the decking.

Later enquiries suggest this may have been the remains of a Landing Barge Vehicle (LBV) or the bow section of a Landing Craft Flak (LCF) both of which are similar in general appearance though quite different in size. Only further diving in better conditions will resolve this mystery.

Our last day in Normandy saw a return of the fantastic weather enjoyed at the start of our adventure and provided an opportunity to enjoy some of the many land based attraction of the area.

First on the list was the nearby privately operated Port en Bessin wreck museum which holds a vast array of artifacts and material recovered from the landing beaches as well as several ships bells including that of the Susan B Anthony.



Cider and shipwrecks

Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010

We then traveled to the nearby town of Bayeux famous for its tapestry and cathedral. We spent a delightful afternoon exploring this medieval city and discovered that there was a lot more to see than the obvious sites. Winding cobbled streets gave way to pretty parks and riverside walks



Bayeux



Bayeux



Bayeux



Cider and shipwrecks *Normandy 9th – 17th July 2010*

Our final stop was at the German Battery at Longues-sur-Mer between Arromanches and Port en Bessin.

The fortifications are reasonably intact and provide a good insight into how the German gun crews lived and the formidable obstacle they presented to the Allied forces.

