

Course Report: GUE Tech 1, 17-21st February 2010

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As an instructor, there are many things that I look forward to when diving. I look forward to sharing my joy of diving with others, to seeing people grow as divers, to find and exceed their limits. But one thing that that I value as much as these things is the chance to be a student again myself. It really does tick all the boxes, on the purely superficial level I know that I don't have to organise other people – I just need to turn up at the start of the class! But on a deeper level, there is a sense of rediscovery, of finding joy in learning and knowing that at some point I will not only find my limits but also stretch myself beyond them. Not only does this make me a better diver, but it makes me a better instructor.

Add into that mix the fact that this particular course was the first ever GUE Tech 1 course held in New Zealand, that I knew that Liam was excited to come over from Australia to teach it and that we had a strong team... I had high expectations, and whilst I don't want to give away too much too early, the course certainly didn't disappoint.



We eased ourselves into the course slowly, with the first evening talking about the failure modes of isolator manifolds and going through the team procedures for dealing with failures. Despite the rain, we set up a line circuit outside and started going through dry runs related to team positioning and re-ordering – things that will be familiar to you if you've done one of our cavern courses. Inevitably, lines would mysteriously become attached to ours leaving us with the dilemma of sorting out where we were and which line was the correct one that would lead us to the safety of our exit point – all things that we would be expecting on our dives the next day!

Our first two days diving were in Lake Pupuke, and we were planning four dives back to back. Like many Tech 1 students, at the end of the first dive we were almost ready to throw in the towel. Skills that we knew that we could do, valve drills and s-drills were ropery at best. The second dive of the day was a scenario based dive, where as a team of three we needed to identify and resolve failures in line with the protocols we'd learnt the day before. After the dive it was clear that it's so easy to create more problems than you fix unless you are careful. The second two dives repeated the pattern, one skills dive and then one scenario dive as an opportunity to not make the same mistakes we'd made on the second dive - with various manifold failures, lost masks and OOG situations all happening at once it was easy to forget what we are actually trying to manage. So Liam's take home message for the day was - slow it down, think it through – something that he reiterated later that afternoon when we started going through gas switch protocols before heading home to swot up for the later exam.



Our second day of diving was again back at the lake, where we started off the day with more gas switch dry runs – much to the amusement of passersby who must have thought that we'd lost the plot! Our plan was much the same as the previous day, four dives back to back with two skills dives and two

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scenario dives. The only new skills for the day was a simulated gas switch at 6m, then switching back to backgas at 3m to simulate a gas break, an activity that can improve decompression efficiency when using oxygen as a deco gas. Our skills dives were starting to feel a bit more in control, which just goes to show how much a bit of tension can effect you whilst diving! Saying that, Liam still managed to tie us in knots because we never checked whether manifold failures were fixable - so with failed right posts we had to work out how to deal with an OOG

situation on the bottom and get it up to our gas switch at 6m. Again, Liam hit it home - slow it down, think it through. Finishing the day early, we loaded up our cars and headed north for the next three days in the ocean courtesy of Shane and Julia at Northland Dive. Another person who deserves a special mention is Pete Mesley, as without Pete's trailer that we stacked up with 10 twinsets we'd never have got all the dive gear to the far north! As it was, things were tight as I had four Gs of Helium in my car and Jamie had to fit in 10 deco cylinders as well as find space for Liam. Arriving in good time, we kicked back and relaxed for the evening looking forward to getting in to salt water the next day.



The day dawned and the wind was up producing a bit of chop on the ocean which limited our dive site selection but Shane expertly found us a spot where we managed to tuck behind one of the islands on the eastern side of Cape Brett. The first dive was to 6m, valve drill, S-drill, gas switch then switch back to back gas at 3m on the ascent. Thankfully, we'd practiced wing-on-wing the day before in the lake as the current was whipping through (well, it seemed like it to us). With some modicum of control we finished the dive and dropped down for the second dive to 23m. Reeling out, it wasn't long before someone suffered a fixable failure... keeping it under control, keeping it close to the line seemed so much easier today. On we went, dealing with a couple of fixable failures before my manifold exploded into nothingness and it was time to turn the dive. Whilst we'd seemed to be making progress in terms of not making the same mistakes, we were still rushing in terms of getting out leading to another good talking to from Liam before heading back down to repeat the dive again, this time fixing the issues we'd had - which of course gave Liam the chance to throw us some curve ball problems that we hadn't seen before.



Fourth day, the weather was coming good - no wind, blue skies, no swell. Diving in the north of New Zealand truly is paradise on days like this, so we ran through our dive plans before heading to the wreck of HMNZS Canterbury, a retired Navy frigate. The helicopter landing pad is at 29m, perfect for us to try and nail the ascents. Our first dive was to 6m again, with blue water skills which at last we were pulling together as a team and looking good. On our two deeper dives this day, we managed to not kill anyone by switching to regs that were connected to



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empty tanks.... though the dives were hardly uneventful, with lost deco tanks, primary light failures, lost backup lights fixable manifold failures, and anything else Liam could think of. Each and every one was dealt with in a cool, calm and collected manner. On the second dive, we managed to extend our line to where we were just about to disappear into the helicopter hanger when Liam started throwing problems at us again, forcing a return to the upline where we shared deco gas from 21m to the surface. The hard work was paying off and this was feeling like a team working as a team, no communication problems, no misunderstandings and a real sense of priority. We headed back to the shore for lunch and a long session on deco theory in the afternoon and the good news that James and I were going to be doing our first trimix dives the next day.



As Mel was already Tech 1 qualified, she bailed on us to dive with Jamie, leaving James, myself and Liam to do our first dive to 48m on 18/45, then a 42m dive on 21/35 in perfect conditions.... James acted as team captain for the first dive just by the Hole in the Rock and returned us back to the line where we completed our deco schedule with Mel and Jamie chasing us up the line. Our second dive was at 'the sisters' and I opted to just drift with the mild current along the reef. After the previous four days, it was difficult to relax as I was expecting some catastrophic failure to spoil the dive – but no, we just drifted with the demoiselles and marvelled in the brightness and colour that have been somewhat lacking on previous deeper dives. Finishing deco at 6m, Liam pulled out his wet notes at scrawled:



Overall, Tech 1 was a great course... Liam is a great instructor, definitely deserving of GUE instructor of the year for 2009. It is definitely challenging, but also a great opportunity to learn. Whilst 16 dives in five days may have left me a little stiff in places, it's also fuelled my passion to explore the deeper dive sites in New Zealand's waters and to continue to share my joy of diving by teaching and guiding divers who want to explore them as well.