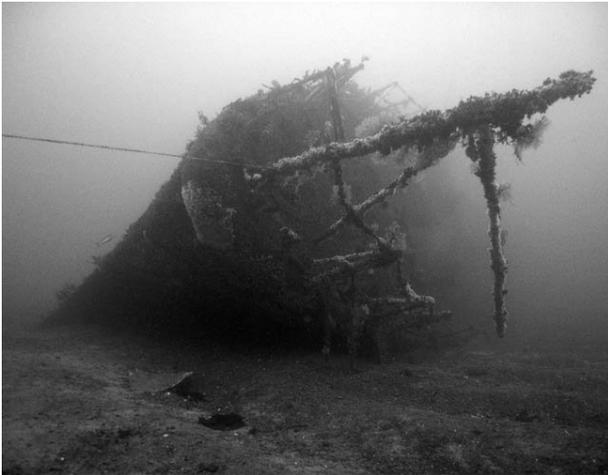


Trip Report: HMNZS Waikato “Anchor Hunt”, 24th April 2010

Melanie Jeavons (Photos: Andy Connor)



As you will know, all of us in Tech Dive NZ have enjoyed numerous dives on the Waikato, both for training as well as just pleasure, so when Kate at Dive! Tutukaka approached us to find out whether we'd be interested in doing a search and recovery mission to find the anchor, we were very keen. Especially when she said that the Navy had had an initial look – but with no success. (We later suspected that while they may have gone down “for a search”, there was sufficient exposed chain close enough to the bow that they simply couldn't have missed it, so the chances are they took full the opportunity to have a bit of a pleasure dive. Well, either that or I have grave concerns about the security of the country from any sea invasions!)

We did our initial search some weeks ago when Jamie and I were up teaching a Wreck and Advanced Wreck course. While I was showing Peter the delights of line laying, Jamie headed out from the bow to see what he could find. There was no sign of the chain attached to any part of the wreck and the visibility wasn't fantastic so he didn't get his hopes up. Attaching his primary reel to the bow, he headed off on a bit of a search. After several metres, he came across a link of chain just poking out of the sand, approx 15m away from the wreck. As the bottom was made up of a mix of gravel and sand, it was relatively easy for him to dig away the gravel and attach the line to the chain so that there was a fixed route from the wreck to at least a part of the chain. Now we at least had a place to start the search!

As all this was taking place at depth of 30m, he had limited time without racking up extensive deco, so managed to extend the line by a further 20m, each time digging down to find the chain links and attaching the line to it so that we didn't have to repeat the process on every dive.

The next dive, I was keen to have a go so buddied up with him. He'd told me that the line following the chain was very straight, which made sense as the ship went down at anchor so the chain was likely to be lying straight along the sea bed. Great, I thought, that should make it nice and easy as all we have to do is swim in a straight line, then we can dig every 20m or so to confirm the links are still there and attach the line. Jamie was pretty sceptical about the reality of this, but what does he know?? So he'd actually been down there and seen it, while I hadn't, but what difference could that make?? Hmm..

Optimistically, I headed to the end of his line and extended it along just a further 10m. That'll show him how easy it is. I started digging down, generously allowing myself 10cm either side just incase I was a bit off centre. Several minutes later, I'm still digging. Several more minutes later, I've moved 5m closer to his last tie off and repeated my digging. Finally, about 2m away from his tie off, I dig and find the chain! Well, it was worth a try, my underwater gestures said in response to Jamie's rather pointed look..

We continued our search every couple of metres and tied the line off at every point. As we approached our planned deco time, the sea bed had just become more sand than gravel and while we could still dig to find the

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top of the chain link, it was proving very hard to dig sufficiently deep to be able to get the line through the whole as the sand would just collapse back down into where we were digging. Finally, we just left the reel on top of the link and started our ascent.

The third dive of the day was purely spent attaching milk bottles to the links that we had uncovered so that if a storm came through, the sand wouldn't cover our line and we wouldn't need to repeat all of our work. Discussing things at the end of the day, we both agreed that we simply couldn't make much progress with having to dig manually in the sand. With an estimate chain length of 150-200m, having to dig every 2m simply wasn't feasible with the sort of bottom times we were prepared to do at 30m.

Over the next few weeks, we discussed all sorts of ideas, some far more feasible than others. Blowing the sand away using scooters was suggested. Jamie gave it some serious thought. Well, either that or he was just lost in a fantasy of a bikini clad Jessica Alba in Into the Blue... Yes guys, you know the scene! Finally, we decided to contact NIWA as we had some dealings with them on a Halcyon side and they came up trumps, offering to lend us a hand held underwater metal detector.

So we found ourselves once again on Henrick J, this time armed with a metal detector. We had been told that the visibility was particularly good on the wrecks that week so we were pretty excited when we attached to the buoy and saw the blue water, but nothing could have prepared us for just how good it really was. As we dropped down we could see the outline of the wreck from only a few metres, and resting on the sea bed at just over 30m, I turned round and got a wave from Hemi who was swimming to the buoy on the surface. On his return, he said that he had never seen such good visibility in his 5 years in Tutukaka.



As much as the temptation was to just sit and stare in awe at the sight of the wreck in such clear water, we quickly remembered that we were sitting in 30m of water and while we had plenty of gas in our twin tanks, our deco time at that depth would quickly rack up. The milk bottles that we had attached to the buried chain on the previous dive had survived the large storms that had recently passed through so we were able to pick up the trace on the metal detector and were pleased to see how well it responded. On a couple of occasions, I swam slightly off the line and the needle immediately dropped back to show that I was going wrong.

Now as some of you are aware, I have been known to suffer from narcosis... Because we could follow the readings from the detector, we were able to swim quite quickly (which can increase the effect of narcosis), and possibly it was the anticipation and excitement of what we might find, but I was feeling it quite badly on this dive. We had extended our line a further 50m or so when we came across a bit of wiring sticking out of the sand. After having examined it (in more detail than one normally would!), I turned to resume our course to find that the needle on the detector wasn't responding at all – I must have moved slightly off the direction. I swam to the right, then to the left a few feet but much to my confusion, I still didn't get any reading, so I turned and went back over the line we had just laid to definitely be able to pick the signal up. Again, no response. I can become slightly paranoid with narcosis and my immediate reaction was disbelief (well, actually, I could believe it!) that I must have been so narced that I had been randomly swimming in a direction without actually

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following any signal. Horrified by the thought that I might have to admit this to Jamie, I started digging to see if there was any chain beneath us and cannot express my relief when I felt a link! By pure coincidence, the metal detector had simply decided to give up at the point that we stopped to examine the wire.

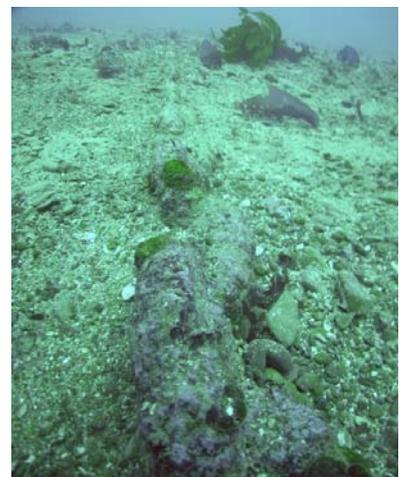
Resigned to having to continue manually, we started to dig the sand to try and completely uncover the chain so



that we could put something through it to mark it. As I did one section, Jamie moved back a few yards to try a different section. While it may sound innocuous enough, it is actually pretty hard work digging at that depth and Jamie soon became pretty narced as well. Suddenly the trimix mix of 30/30 that we had dismissed as being unnecessary for these depths would have been very welcome! Those of you who have dived in a team with Jamie and I will know how well we communicate underwater but from this point onwards, we might as well have been diving in separate oceans. As the chain had so far been lying in a very straight line, I decided to just head out on a bearing and see whether there were any more visual references. As I looked behind me to line myself up with the line already laid, Jamie made big sweeping motions with his hands. "Excellent idea", I thought, "make big clouds of sand and use them to line up as transit points to stay in

the right direction". No, actually, he'd meant dig there... He then signalled me to continue on swimming (which I did), but actually he was telling me that he was heading back to the shot line with the broken metal detector. So off he headed in one direction while I headed off in another! We were "connected" by the line but even in the 30m+ visibility, we soon lost sight of each other.

I continued on, looking left and right for anything that might show where the chain was sitting and after a few minutes saw a couple of lumps about 15m to my right. I put the line down so I could return to where I was if it turned out to be nothing and swam over to investigate them. Sure enough, they were definitely bits of metal and further hunting showed the top of a link of a chain just sticking out of the sand so we were back on track. I went back over to my line to move it. As I swam back to the wreckage, I decided it was important to waft the line as much as possible to show Jamie (who would presumably be following it back to me) that the line was moving. Quite why I didn't think he could just follow the change in line direction, I'm not sure, but it made sense at the time...



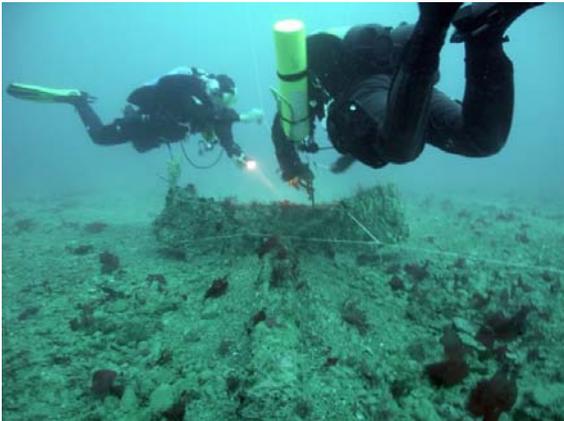
As we had racked up a decent amount of deco by this time, I decided to tie the line off to the chain there so that we could continue our search on the following dive. Jamie had just caught up with me by then so we had a quick look round together then started our ascent. We had nearly 30 mins of deco showing on our computers so it was with great satisfaction that we switched to our 100% deco bottles at 6m and watched our deco come down to a far more manageable amount of time.

Upon surfacing, we discussed what we had found and what we planned on doing on our next dive, plus how to avoid getting quite as narced as we had on that dive! We were pretty confident that we were very close to the anchor as we had laid out a full primary reel of approx 100m, plus there had been an additional 30m previously

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laid. Also, the chain that was visible by the pieces of wreckage was lying double backed on itself, so it made sense that would be close to the anchor. Well, that was the theory!

For our second dive of the day, we were far more structured. We descended down the line and swam directly - but slowly - along to the end of the line where we tied an additional primary reel to the bits of wreckage. Being rather less narced than previously, it was obvious on first glance that my "double backed chain" was total rubbish. It was simply normal links of the size chain you would expect on a ship the size of the Waikato, yet this had been processed by my brain as two or three rows of the sort of chain that you'd find on a 40ft yacht! Ah, the joys of high partial pressures of nitrogen.



Once again we headed off blindly in the direction we hoped the chain would be lying but fortunately now it led us to far more of a rocky bottom so instead of all the chain being buried by sand, sections of it were sitting just visible above parts of gravel. With the fantastic visibility that we had, we were able to see far enough ahead to each bit of exposed chain. We had several false starts with other bits of wreckage along the way that fooled us from a distance into thinking they might be the anchor but when it did finally come into view, it couldn't have been mistaken for anything else. It sat in the sand looking ready for a 3,000 ton boat to attach itself to it! Our feeling of elation was huge. While it hadn't taken months to find, there had been a fair amount

of planning and organising gone into it and it was great to have such a successful outcome so quickly. We attached and sent up a buoy to mark the position, then the final dive of the day was spent attaching a couple of more permanent markers.

The actual lifting of the anchor we're happy to leave to the Navy. Unless anyone has several one ton lift bags they can lend us..??

