

Trip Report: Mikhail Lermontov, 10-14th January 2010

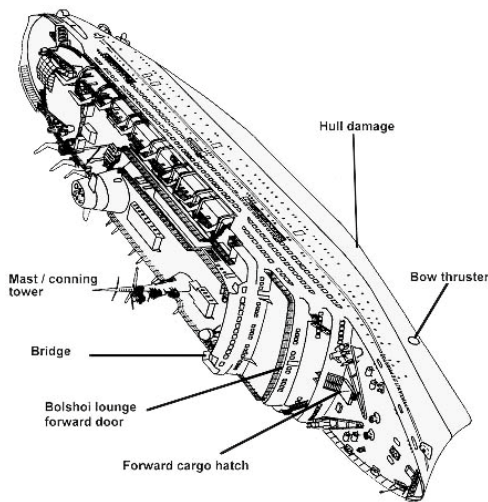
“Journey of a First Timer to the Mikhail Lermontov”

Tony Frith

Ever since the Mikhail Lermontov sank in 1986 I have yearned to visit her, at the time I had no idea how this was to be accomplished. Now however after much training and planning I have finally fulfilled this dream or at least a part of it. Whenever the subject of the Mikhail Lermontov comes up there is invariably a comment or more on how silty she is, and yes while she is dark and silty with care there is much that you can see and do when you dive her.



My dive buddy Chris and I first decided that we wanted to dive the Mikhail Lermontov in February 2009, but knew at the time that neither of us was ready to undertake such challenging dives. Throughout the year we discussed options, dived the Waikato and the Canterbury and undertook further training to prepare us for meeting our goal of diving this amazing ship. By October when the opportunity to sign up for the trip arose we decided that we were going to make a go of it and jumped in head first by signing our names to the dotted line.



By January after completing the GUE Fundamentals and the PADI Advanced wreck specialty I hoped that I was ready to begin the journey of discovery. Chris and I met up with the rest of the team (Jamie, Mel, James and Astrid) on the 9th of January in Picton, where we packed the gear required for our trip up to Port Gore. This is where the Mikhail Lermontov lies on her starboard side in 37 metres of water.

After hearing so much about the ship we were understandably anxious to get our gear on and get into the water, so after a tasty lunch prepared by our excellent chef and guide Andrea we geared up and headed out to where the ship lies. Whilst a little rough on the journey out we were all exhilarated to be out here, especially those of us who were as they say Lermontov Beginners (Mel, Astrid, Chris and Myself).

Once we had moored up to the Bolshoi buoy we dropped into the water and headed down into the green murk, as we descended a whitish shape gradually started to appear. When you first visit the Mikhail Lermontov it is hugely disorientating by virtue of its massive size. Imagine looking all around only to find the side of the ship stretching as far as the eye could see. It takes some time to regather your wits and orientate yourself along the windows of the lounge deck. Once that was accomplished we headed up the slope of the hull to the bridge wing, before moving back along the bridge deck towards the funnel, peering in and investigating the various doorways that we came across on our travels. We surfaced after this dive bubbling with excitement and enthusiastic about the fact we actually were here diving on the Mikhail Lermontov. We returned to the lodge to a delicious hot dinner prepared by

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Andrea and an interesting card game sh**head that seems to occupy many of the idle hours on dive trips.

For our second dive the next morning the plan was for me to navigate the way for our team (Chris, Jamie and myself) from the Bolshoi Buoy to the Engine Vents and then to follow the line through this vast expanse of space. Upon entering the water and dropping down the line I again had my breath taken away by how massive this ship actually is. We regrouped above the windows into the Bolshoi Lounge and headed up to the bridge wing before heading aft to the Engine Vents. The deal here was if we wanted to visit the engine room we first had to find the line that Jamie had laid the previous day. Chris spotted it first and with his can light pointed it out to me. I entered the engine room and looked around the cavernous space that was revealed, it quite literally took my breath away. As we followed the line into these cavernous depths the beams of three Halcyon can lights stabbed out pointing out features, looking into dark places and investigating this huge space that is so dark yet once lit so clear. We continued along the line to the bunker room door and to say the outside light shining down was wonderful would not be lying. I mean I like dark enclosed spaces but I also like to see daylight shining down as well.

After lunch prepared by the lovely Andrea, we returned to the wreck with her for a guided tour of the hull. Andrea showed us the enormous propellers and the massive gash that sank the Mikhail Lermontov. As I swam along the gash, I can't help but be amazed at how long the ship was able to stay afloat, the damage looks as though someone has taken a massive can opener and just opened her up. It was definitely Titanic type damage. We continued to swim towards the stern and almost bumped into Andrea hovering above the prop shaft. It took me a while to realize exactly what was in front of me and when I did I was surprised the propeller is enormous even one blade of it loomed large in my vision. Unfortunately the visibility was not good enough at this time to get a photo of the entire propeller.



For our third dive of the day Chris and I chose to visit the officer's mess, which is situated just below the bridge. We entered through a window at about 27m and were immediately surrounded by gloom, our lights moved back and forth across the room looking for features that appeared to have collapsed. Where the shelves used to run across the back of the mess, there is simply a blank wall with holes through it. As we moved around the room its confined space made it easy to stir up the silt which then began to fill the space around us. Chris and I looked at each other and we both had the same idea "Let's get out of here!" We exited through the window that had been our entrance point and decided to complete our dive with a visit to the bow. Finning past the massive cranes that still rest on the foredeck is quite eerie, especially in the green that surrounded us. We returned to the lodge for another superb dinner and another evening of cards.

The next morning dawned even better than the previous day and the water in the bay below the lodge and even further out in Port Gore was almost oily calm, what an awesome day for a dive. We had breakfast and geared up; imagine my delight at climbing into a wet clammy wetsuit. Next time I am definitely getting a dry suit! We headed out for our first dive of the day and were lucky enough to get a guided tour through the Bolshoi Lounge. Andrea took us in through the windows by the line and down into the dance floor area for a look around before heading up to view the chandelier. On the way through sweeping the beam across the room it is easy to spot the chairs and other detritus balanced

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against the lower tables in great piles and wonder what would have happened if she hadn't hit Pelham rock. We continued up into the balcony and down the half spiral stair at the front and out through the forward door before following the ship around and out to the wheelhouse which in itself is an amazing place to visit. We finished the dive with a quick visit through the corridor windows beside the Nevsky bar.

Over lunch we decided that Chris and I were going to do the swimming pool and Neptune bar dive. We moored this time to the midships buoy near the funnel and made our way back towards the swimming pool accompanied by our trusty guide Andrea, who stayed with us long enough to ensure we were at the swimming pool before heading off to other parts. Chris and I found the line and followed it into the black mouth of the door that lay before us, looking all around the area is tiled and the panes of glass above allow a small amount of light to filter through. The line led us through the pool area and over to the Neptune bar where we took



time out to investigate the artifacts including beer cans and bottles. It was quite amazing to see some of the stool still with their padded seats intact whilst others were just the metal pillars. I looked up to see the light filtering in through the windows from the winter garden and my heart was gladdened as we rose up. We entered the winter gardens and once again were surprised by its sheer size, despite the debris that covers the bottom there is more than enough space for two divers to swim side by side along here provided they are careful. On our way to the exit stairs we peered into the library and the cinema and passed by Jamie, Mel and James who were investigating these areas. We completed the dive and while we waited for the others to finish theirs we decided we were going back for the next dive as well.

We headed back in to recharge the tanks and drop a couple of divers off as well as having the all important coffee break. We again moored to the midships buoy and headed back to the Swimming pool this time armed with the camera. The dive was just as stunning when conducted a second time in succession. This time however I got some awesome photos one of which show Chris rising up towards where I was near the winter gardens entrance, all I can see is his Halcyon light beam as in the darkness he himself is near invisible. This shot I feel almost personifies the wreck in that it is dark and scary but also almost exhilarating. After completing the dive we returned to the lodge for dinner and scrumptious chocolate pudding that just tastes incredible.



The last morning dawned clear and sunny and after breakfast we again headed for the wreck. This morning the plan was to dive the engine room again. We headed down the Bolshoi line again and headed for the engine vents, quite a different feeling this time not having Jamie. We arrived at the engine vents and it seemed as though it had all changed, in reality it was the perspective that I was taking of them as the leader of the party rather than just a party member. After finding the line we entered the engine room and followed the line through, pausing to take pictures and then following the line back up

through the bunker room door and out into the daylight. This dive was followed by lunch and a quick pack up of the gear so that Andrea could head back to Picton with the van.

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For our last dive the plan was to dive the library, which we did and managed to seriously silt ourselves out in the process. The library isn't really a very large area which explains the silting out. But upon entering it looked as though there wasn't much there, upon later looking at the plan I realized that we weren't quite at the right place and perhaps should have looked a little deeper down and further across for most of the books. I did spot one book off to the side and covered in silt. Quite amazing that it has lasted so long, I mean its just paper and it has been underwater for the last twenty three years.



Once we had stirred the silt up there wasn't much point in remaining and so we finished our dive and headed back to the boat where we packed away our gear and changed for our journey back to Picton.

On our way back we had to pass through the Cape Jackson passage that had damaged and ultimately sunk the Mikhail Lermontov and I was struck by how narrow the passage between the cape and the lighthouse actually was. Once I had laid my eyes on the semi submerged rocks surrounding the lighthouse it was obvious why the Mikhail Lermontov has been opened up as if by a can opener.