



A cable drum still secured to the bow decking.

D I V I N G

T H E R M S N I A G A R A wreck search°

BETTER THAN GOLD!

: TEXT BY RICHARD HARRIS

SUDDENLY I HEARD CRAIG SQUEALING IN HIS HELIUM FALSETTO. THERE OUT IN THE OPEN ON THE SAND WAS THE SHIP'S BELL! AN EXCHANGE OF UNINTELLIGIBLE CHATTER FOLLOWED. I 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 WE SPONTANEOUSLY EMBRACED AND RENEWED OUR EXCITED BABBLE!

At the tender age of 15, my father gave me a tattered copy of James Taylor's 1940's classic *Gold from the Sea*; the story of a bullion ship which sank near Auckland, New Zealand after striking a German mine. The tale of the ragtag group of divers and sailors who overcame enormous adversity to salvage around 2 1/2 tons of gold from the wreck in the middle of a minefield was almost stranger than fiction and was one I never forgot.

In 1995 a Welshman named Tim Cashman was relaxing in the Whangarei Deep Sea Anglers Club north of Auckland when he spied a collection of old black and white photographs on the wall. A graceful luxury liner was featured, and below that a diving bell and a group of men standing around an enormous stack of gold bars! Intrigued, Tim became caught up in the tale of the RMS *Niagara* and her gold. He set out to teach himself

the techniques of deep mixed gas diving. Then in 1999, he and Australian Dave Apperley finally dived the wreck. So began the era of modern exploration of the wreck. Since that first dive, only 12 divers have made a total of 23 dives to the site.

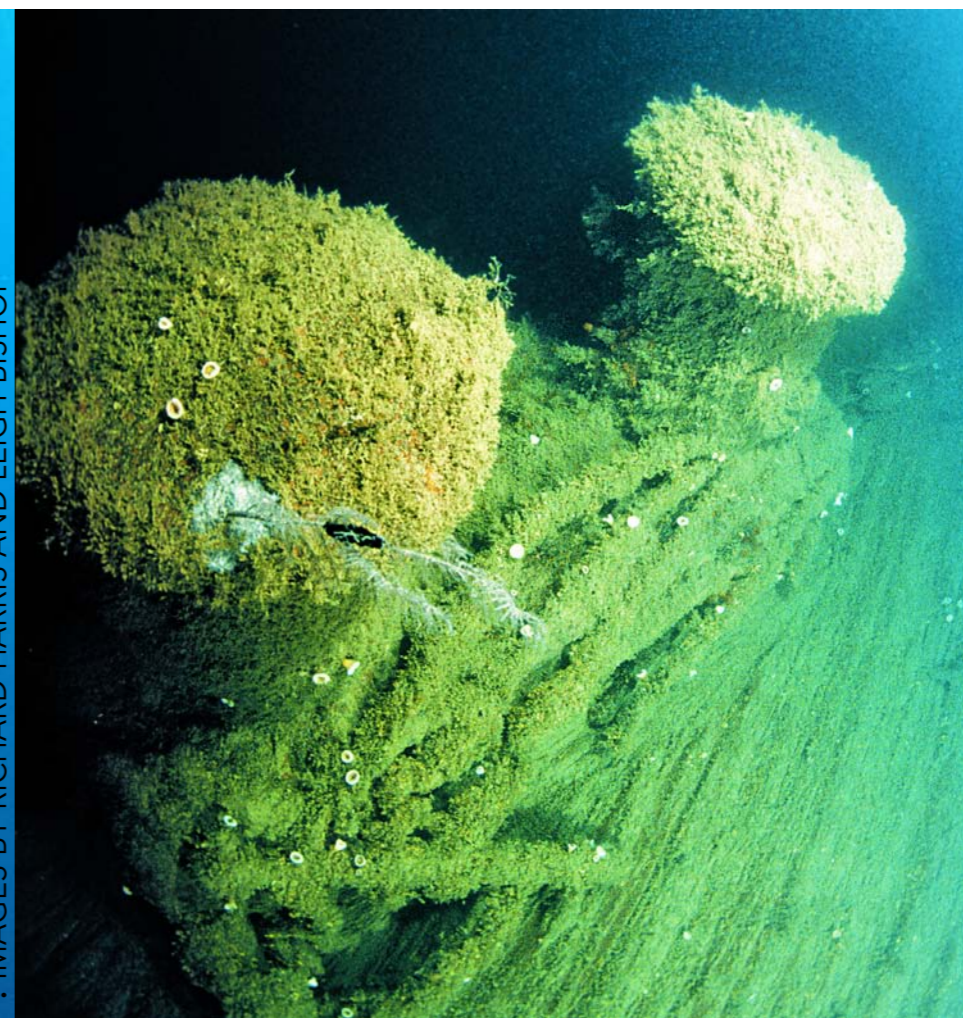
A combination of factors might explain why so few have made it to the wreck. She lies in 120 metres of water many miles from the small fishing port of Tutukaka. The seas in the area are well known for poor conditions and bad weather has foiled diving on all of the past trips. Technical diving is in its infancy in New Zealand, so most expeditions have been organized with the help of divers from Australia. When you travel from overseas, you are pretty much stuck with the conditions on site with no options for deferring the dives. On this occasion expedition leader Craig Howell had put together an exceptional

team including the original diver Tim Cashman from Wales, Australians Craig Challen, Dean Chamberlain, Andrew Macintosh, John Dalla-Zuanna (JDZ), Dave Apperley and Richard Harris; joined by English deep wreck photographer Leigh Bishop. Local support divers completed the crew, and the spacious powercat *Pacific Hideaway* would be our dive platform.

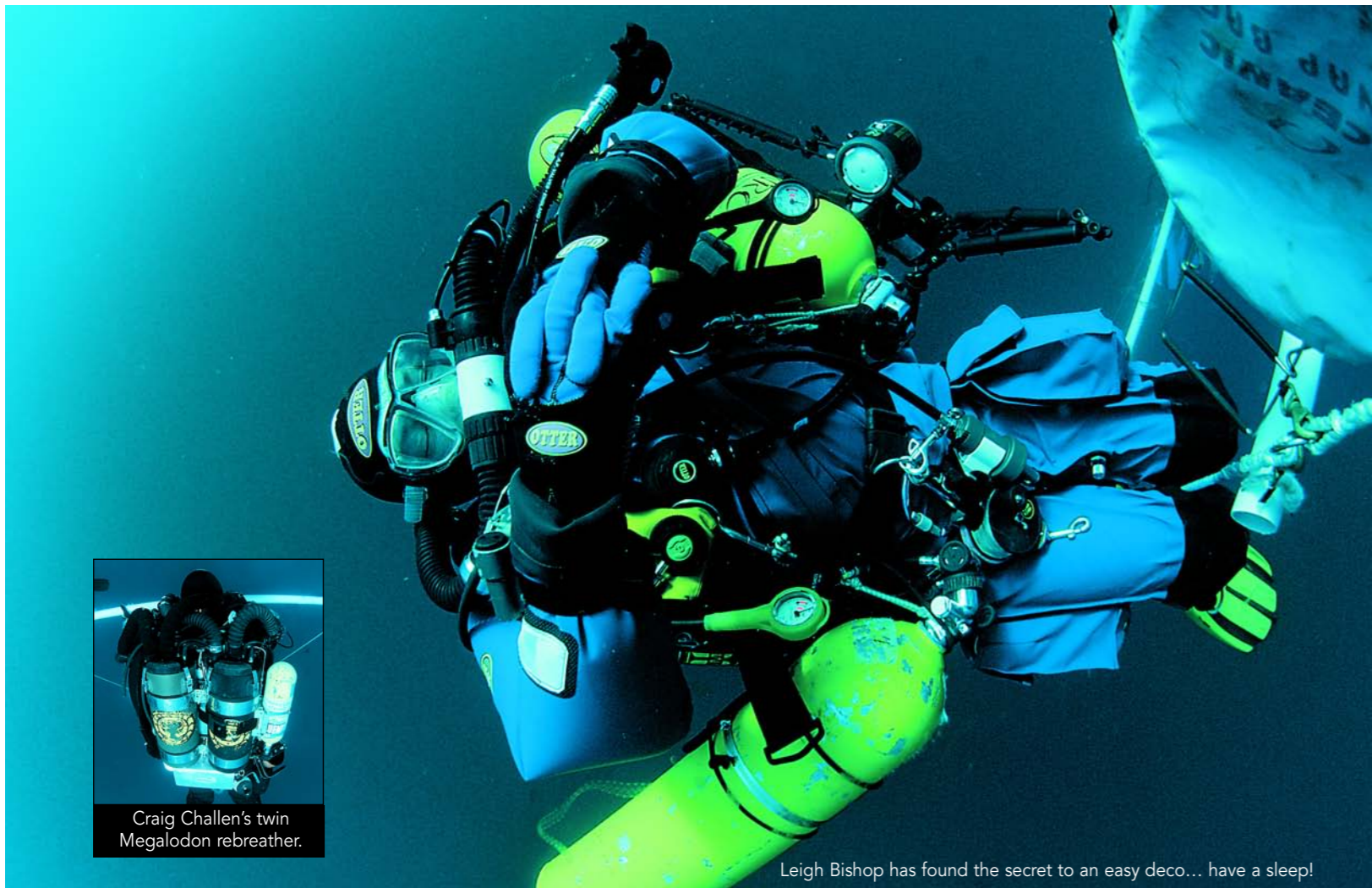
But the real ace up our sleeve was local diver and historian Keith Gordon. Author of his own book on the ship *Deep Water Gold*, Keith has been involved in all the diving on the wreck since Tim made his first foray in 1999. Keith operates a survey and salvage company called SeaROV and no one knows the site better than him. If you want to dive *Niagara*, you talk to Keith. Finally after months of preparation the big day arrived, dawning calm and sunny.



: IMAGES BY RICHARD HARRIS AND LEIGH BISHOP



Rope mooring bollards on the side of the Niagara.



Craig Challen's twin Megalodon rebreather.

Leigh Bishop has found the secret to an easy deco... have a sleep!

NIAGARA FACT FILE

RMS *Niagara* launched 17 August 1912 at Clydebank, Glasgow by John Brown & Co for the Union Steamship Company Ltd of New Zealand. Length 574.7 feet; Tonnage 13415 gross; Engines: 12500hp in two, four cylinder triple expansion engines and a Parsons low pressure turbine (Triple screws); Speed 16kts average.

'At the time of her sinking *Niagara* had sailed the Pacific route for over 25 years, covering more miles than any other liner in service. She was operated by the Canadian Australasian Line and was leaving Auckland harbour on route to Canada. The 'Queen of the Pacific' was carrying 136 passengers, 202 crew, and a cargo of 295 boxes of gold bars, when she struck a mine laid by the German raider HSK Orion in the early hours of 19 June 1940. No lives were lost.' From Keith Gordon's book *Deep Water Gold* ISBN 0 473 10056 8

It is hoped that the bell and telegraph from RMS *Niagara* will be displayed at Auckland Maritime Museum.

Two hours after leaving the harbour at Tutukaka we were over the wreck, with the sounder clearly showing her outline and that of the vast shoals of kingfish above. The shotline went in, the deco station was assembled and we were ready to dive.

I always feel a bit nervous before a big dive and this one was no exception. The anticipation of diving this wreck had been drawn out and it was hard to believe I was about to see her in the flesh. Craig Howell and I were the first divers in; our job to check the shotline was on the wreck and release two signal pellets so the other divers know all is good to go. Craig and I hit the cobalt blue water and began our rapid descent to the wreck. The shotline dropped vertically into the clear depths and conditions seemed perfect. At a depth of 80 metres that changed dramatically!

The rope went from vertical to near horizontal and visibility altered from superb to less than six metres. A deep current of nearly one knot was sweeping over the wreck and it became a challenge to pull ourselves along the shotline. With visibility poor, it was very difficult to establish where we were on such a large ship. I dropped over the wreck and onto the sand at 121 metres to

secure the grapnel to a piece of wreckage. Joining Craig back on the hull, we released the signal pellets and began to explore our surrounds.

It was soon clear we were in the vicinity of the bullion room where blasting and salvage occurred so long ago. Torn steel plates, beams and cross members stuck out at all angles with little in the way of recognisable structure to be seen. Monofilament and braided fishing line crisscrossed the wreck presenting a constant hazard for entanglement. Craig pushed into what looked like a promenade deck and for a time we had some respite from the current and the fishing line. But soon we came out onto the hull again and the current seemed to have strengthened, providing a real challenge to safely navigate the wreck at this depth. We decided discretion was the better part of valour and called the dive early at 22 minutes, commencing our 270 minute return to the surface.

The other divers fared little better. Most cut their dives shorter than planned due to the poor conditions on the wreck. Leigh Bishop managed to locate the collapsed bridge area and spotted several large telegraphs lying on the sandy-shale seabed. Even with short



After 67 years on the bottom, Craig Howell was in such a rush to get this prize to the surface, I almost missed the opportunity to capture a photo!

bottom times, it was still five hours until all the divers were back on deck. Over hot soup we discussed the dive while the *Pacific Hideaway* turned for home. 30 minutes later the smell of burning plastic filled the cockpit, soon followed by dense steam choking the cab and upper deck. A fan belt on the port engine had broken and the overheating alarm failed to sound. With a cracked head, the engine was shut down and we limped back to port, one of our divers requiring first aid for a minor elbow bend on the way. Fortunately he was completely better by the time we crawled into Tutukaka harbour at 11pm, narrowly escaping a trip to the local hyperbaric facility.

Because of the late arrival back in port, we missed the next day's diving. The following day the news on our boat was not good, so we decided to spend some time diving the Poor Knights Islands; a world renowned marine park and pretty special as a backup dive plan! But despite the quality of the reef diving, our minds were still on *Niagara* and when we heard that the *Pacific Hideaway* was out of action for the whole week, we decided to move over to Dive Tutukaka's boat *Perfect Day*. However our first dive on *Perfect Day* did not go well. Although the shotline left from the previous dive was on the right marks, it had drifted just off the wreck and four of the divers spent over three hours decompressing after a 120 metre sand dive! We resolve to return the next day but a tropical cyclone to the north had other ideas! 40 knot winds and record local rainfall saw us shore-bound for the next three days. Local roads were cut off by flooding and mudslides, and the Dive Tutukaka shop came close to being destroyed by a large slip in the hill behind them! Had we upset somebody?!

With the expedition drawing to a close and only one somewhat unsatisfactory dive on the wreck to our credit, we were overjoyed to see sunshine and windless conditions on our second to last day. A large swell persisted but it would take more than that to keep us in the local pub! We were joined by Dive NZ editor Dave Moran, as well as Keith Gordon. Tim Cashman was supposed to leave the day before but was caught by the road closures. So he decided to dive one last time before attempting to leave again. The superstitious Welshman declared this to be a

good omen and suggested something special was in the wind! Locating the wreck and dropping the shot went smoothly. JDZ and Craig Challen dived first and tied in the grapnel. Craig Howell and I were next in, swimming over to the wreck from the shot in lowish viz but no current. Reaching *Niagara* near the forward hold, we turned until we reached the enormous foremast. Heading out along the sand we swam underneath the mast

Dive! Tutukaka is proud to support the NZTECH07 Team.

Our team are privileged to be involved as the support vessel, and provide divers and crew for the NZTECH 07 expedition on the *Niagara*. We recognise their commitment to excel in their field and applaud their success. As the major supporter in the sinking of both the *Tui* in 1999 and the *HMNZS Waikato* in 2000 as artificial reefs, we are proud to see the development of the Ultimate training ground for wreck and technical diving in New Zealand. With the two purpose sunk wrecks and the nearby Poor Knights Islands, Tutukaka is the undisputed dive capital of New Zealand.

Committed to Excellence. Committed to Diving. Today and tomorrow.

Poor Knights Dive Centre, Marina Road, Tutukaka RD3 Whangarei.
Ph + 64 9 434 3867 Freephone 0800 288 882 email info@diving.co.nz
www.diving.co.nz

wreck search°



One of five telegraphs found scattered around the wreck, Leigh Bishop and I were keen to raise this treasure to the surface.

BETTER THAN GOLD!

admiring the large crows-nest, and some mast head lights on the sand. I paused to photograph these when suddenly I heard Craig squealing in his helium falsetto. There out in the open sitting on the sand was the ship's bell, the most sought after prize!

Craig and I continued aft until we reached another pile of wreckage; the remnants of the bridge. As Leigh had discovered on the earlier dive, at least three telegraphs on their pedestals lay in the sand. I tied a lift bag onto the closest telegraph, wrestling it from the surrounding wreckage. But the bag had insufficient lift, so Leigh swam over and added his bag; we now had two historic artifacts on their way to the surface. Soon the ship's horn above let all the divers' know that the two prizes were safely onboard the *Perfect Day*.

That night saw the team celebrating on the boat in Tutukaka harbour. Champagne flowed freely, the local press came to photograph the magnificent bell and Keith got misty eyed as he thanked those who had helped create this historic moment. The 9 divers themselves, the support divers and crew, the expedition sponsors and the countless other helpers had all played an invaluable role in reaching this point. 67 years after this magnificent liner disappeared below the waves during the madness of World War 2, and 20 years since Keith Gordon first peered at the wreck through the eyes of his ROV, an international team of free-swimming tech divers had located and raised the soul of the ship...the bell. In their eyes, it was...



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, the support divers and other helpers!

