

Diving the USS Oriskany (28th September) by Steve Marchant

After lugging my dive gear on a fantastic journey from San Francisco, through Yosemite and down to the Grand Canyon & Las Vegas, I was now in Fort Walton Beach. Fort Walton Beach is located up on the pan handle of Florida not to far from the Alabama border. I was staying with friends there and was determined to dive the wreck of the USS Oriskany – AKA the Mighty ‘O’. Info about the wreck can be found on <http://www.mbtdivers.com>

Before going to the states I decided to do some research on getting a dive on the Mighty ‘O’. I emailed Steve Powell of Scubatech diving in Destin to see if they did trips to the wreck. Destin is the next fishing village along from Fort Walton. I had dived with Scubatech on a few previous visits to Fort Walton so knew Steve quite well, who incidentally is originally from Trowbridge, and still has his Wiltshire twang after more than 20 years in the states. Steve got back to me the same day that I sent him the email, advising me that they do not run trips as it is to far out and that I would need to go to Pensacola to get a charter. He also advised me to book early as the boats can get full up weeks in advance.

So after numerous emails to MBT divers, Florida Dive Pros, and Scuba shack, I booked myself a place with MBT divers who were the only ones taking a boat out on the 28th. But they did say that my name was the only one on the list at the moment but this was a month before the date. So when I arrived at Fort Walton on the 24th September I rang MBT divers to confirm my place and to see if the trip was still to go ahead. Bad News! As my name was still the only one on the boat they said it will more than likely be cancelled, and to try and get a space on another boat. After ringing around many dive centers with no luck, I rang Scubatech to see if they knew anybody else. They gave me a number for Capt Jeff who runs trips out to the Oriskany. I rang him and he had a space to go out on the 27th. I said yes and he said he’d ring me on the evening of the 26th to confirm if the trip was still going ahead. Well the evening of the 26th came and hadn’t heard anything till a quarter to nine when Capt Jeff rang to tell me that the trip was being cancelled because the sea state for the following day was a 3ft swell (WHAT? I could make bigger waves in the bath!). I was gutted.





I decided to go to Scubatech on the morning of the 27th and get a couple of dives in out from Destin. The sea was flat calm, but I suppose it may well have been slightly rougher 30 miles out. After getting back from my 2 excellent morning dives, I began to scour the internet to find more dive operators to ring in the hope of getting a boat out to the Mighty 'O'. I finally struck lucky and got in contact with Capt Dave Mucci of Blue Water adventures. Unfortunately he was not taking a boat out but gave me the number of Capt Ron of <http://pensacoladivecompany.com> . I called Capt Ron and he was taking a boat out on the 28th but was waiting for a couple of the guys to get back to him to confirm their place. So I had to have an agonizing wait till that evening for Capt Ron to call me. Just before 8pm I got a call from Ron to tell me that one of the guys had cancelled and that the place was mine.....Yippee!

At 5am the following morning bleary eyed I got up had a nice cup of tea and some toast then rang Ron as he asked me to just to make sure the weather wasn't going to stop play so to speak. Yep, forecast was fine and only a 2ft swell.

So just before 6am I set off down HWY 98 West towards Pensacola which is about an hours drive away. Meet up time was 07.30am outside of MBT divers so I thought leaving at 6 would give me ample time incase I got lost. Getting to Pensacola was the easy part, finding Navy Boulevard was the hard part but after a couple of stops asking the locals I got to MBT divers at 07.20am, time to spare.

I went into the shop and met up with the other 5 divers that I was going to be diving with, 2 guys from Atlantic City, 2 from West Virginia and the from Texas. One of the guys, Terry was quite a character, getting on for 60 he had a dive bag from the 18th century and some pieces of dive equipment that looked like they were used when Jacques Cousteau started diving. These bits of equipment were not actually used by Terry! We all introduced ourselves and chatted amongst each other while waiting for Capt Ron and his boat to turn up. As everything is so laid back in that part of the country, it was 07.50 before Ron showed his face in the shop. He immediately named me 'The Limey' and so started the barrage of taking the p!ss out of the British, but I gave as good as I got. It was all just friendly banter. MBT divers use Ron to take clients out so we pay him but the hiring of tanks, weights or other equipment have to go through MBT divers.

After loading up the boat 'The Sea Sherpa Express', it was into the battle bus for a short 2 minute ride to the launch site. Ron and 1st mate Stevo got the boat in the water, the large bean bags were made ready for us (Yes you read it right 'Bean Bags') to sit on for our comfort, for the hours ride out to the dive site. We even got given a set of ear defenders to wear, just incase you thought the engines were to loud (Bonus!).

It just turned 9am as we left Pensacola, and were soon flying at a steady speed of 26 knots. With all of us comfortably sat on our executive bean bags, time soon passed and before we knew it Capt Ron was shouting 'we're here'. It had taken us an hour and five minutes to travel nearly 30 miles out. Once we had moored up to the buoy line and Stevo had all the guide ropes and safety tanks in the water, we started to kit up and Ron gave the brief for the 1st dive.

Dive 1 (Flight control deck & escalator)

We got in our buddy pairs, checks done and entered the water. We descended down the shot line to the top of the island and waited for Capt Ron. He was going to lead the dive. The 1st place we went was to the top of the escalator which we all had our turn of shining our torches down it to see the steps disappear into the darkness. Next was down to flight deck level at the base of the island. The island itself is so big that Ron told us that you need to swim out from the wreck some 50-60m to get a full view of it. We then went to the flight control office, and then worked our way up to the huge smoke stack and the American flag that has been hung up near the top of the island. Just seeing the site of this wreck is fantastic as you descend, it's huge. I reached a depth of 42m with a dive time of 36 minutes.



Our surface interval after the 1st dive was spent drinking ice cold bottled water, eating grilled chicken and burgers which Stevo cooked on the portable b-b-q and of course soaking up the lovely sun. We all talked about the 1st dive and the laughing and joking also continued mainly at the Limey's expense. Ron also answered any questions that we asked about the Mighty 'O'.



Dive 2 (Penetrating the Islands decks)

This dive saw us descend to the top of the island then straight down to 36m and into one of the side doors to one of the many levels. From here we explored inside working our way up the corridors and flights of stairs before ending up in the bridge which gave a great view out of it of the deck. After spending some time looking around inside the bridge and surrounding area, and with plenty of air and time left we just had a good look around other parts of the top of the island. While on the line ascending, we had a rather curious barracuda and remoras keeping us company. After carrying out a safety stop we were all safely back on the boat. Kit off and stowed away, some cold water drank and mooring lines etc pulled up, it was time to head back to Pensacola.



The 2 dives I did on the USS Oriskany were fantastic. But I only saw a fraction of the island. This is where most of the interesting stuff is and it will take many many dives to see it all. The flight deck is a vast expanse but does not really have anything of interest on it. To dive anything below flight deck level and you're looking at the 50-60m+ mark. I'm glad I had the opportunity to dive this fantastic wreck. And I'm certainly looking forward to going back in the future to dive it again, not only to explore it further but also to see how much more growth and fish life will have made it's home on it. If any of you club members are thinking of visiting that part of the world then I would recommend diving with Capt Ron of the Pensacola dive company. He provided a very pleasant, humorous and professional service. He was also very knowledgeable on the history of the Oriskany itself and of any dive related matters. All in all a great days diving was had by all members of the diving party.



