

Diving with the **DEEP SEA DETECTIVES**

By Jim Vafeas

There's nothing like a good dive, especially when diving helps to support something good. Such was the case last summer when New Jersey's Blue Water Divers sponsored a fundraiser for the Michael J. Norwood Memorial Research Fund.

Norwood was one of the original co-hosts of History Channel's "Deep Sea Detectives" who died tragically while filming a deep-dive episode in Palau. In his memory, an endowed fund was established to support research by Divers Alert Network.

The weekend-long event offered not only diving with detectives John Chatterton and Richie Kohler, but opportunities to talk with them over meals. Calling Blue Water Divers, expecting the weekend to be sold out, I learned that spots were still open for my buddy Craig Morris and me, and in a flash I nailed them down with my credit card.

Not long after we rolled into the parking lot at 6:30 a.m. we heard a "Good Morning" in the distinct Brooklyn rasp that could only be Richie Kohler. He and Chatterton exchanged introductions and chatted while we waited for the rest of the divers and the dive boat to arrive. Soon the *Gypsy Blood* pulled into the slip previously occupied by the *Seeker*, the fabled boat that had ferried the detectives in their quest to identify the *U-Who* as the *U-869*.



▲ Richie and John flank author Jim Vafeas and Craig Morris.

After loading our gear, filling out the paperwork and responding to the role call, Captain Jim introduced the crew and began briefing us for two dives on the *Pinta* when Richie and John chimed, "Let us do this! We're professionals." They completed the briefing in a dramatic fashion that drew a round of applause from all on board.

The *Pinta* was a 194-foot-long freighter that sank to 90 feet, eight miles east of Shark River Inlet after a May 8, 1963, collision with the *SS City of Perth*. The British freighter stayed afloat and rescued the *Pinta's* crew of 12. As a local instructor, John had often used the *Pinta* on his wreck diving courses. In fact, one diver aboard showed off his NAUI Open Water I card that listed Chatterton as his instructor.

Skies were sunny, wind was light and seas were 1-foot swells as we headed to the wreck, in stark contrast to the forecast of thunderstorms. Buddy teams were confirmed. John and Richie paired up with other divers

on the boat. On the first dive, Craig and I explored the middle and forward cargo holds then swam toward the bow. We then headed into the mild current over the debris of wood and toward the stern. Craig had some equipment issues crop up so we called the dive. The problem couldn't be fixed topside, so he opted to sit out the second dive. If I wanted a second dive, I would need to find a buddy.

Throughout the day John and Richie answered questions, spoke of the show and experiences as local wreck divers. They were very approachable and entertaining. They never said no to a photo request or to sign a log book. If your timing was right, you could engage them one-on-one in conversation. They often joked around with each other but you could tell they both have a deep respect and trust in each other and a passion for what they do.

Midway through our surface interval, the detectives offered to dive with different buddy teams to which I quickly replied, "I'll need a buddy." Richie, Renee, a Blue Waters employee, and I buddied up and formulated a plan to swim to the stern, view the propeller shaft, and then explore some of the *Pinta's* swim-throughs. Throughout the dive we were to keep an eye out for additional lobsters. Richie had already bagged three on his first dive, which he generously offered to anyone who wanted them.

Renee and I entered the water first and soon Richie joined us at the tie-in to the wreck. We flashed "OK" signs and then headed to the stern, enjoying 20 feet of visibility, which was a little better than the first dive. As we swam along the edge of the cargo debris toward the stern, Richie

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▲ Gypsy Blood is readied for trip to the Pinta.

seemingly pulled a lobster out of nowhere. But its underside was full of eggs, so back she went. We continued to the propeller-less shaft, then over the hull to the pilothouse and back over the debris to the forward-most cargo area. All the while we followed Richie's yellow Evolution rebreather and made sure to respond to the "OK" signs he kept flashing every few minutes.

About 20 minutes later, Renee was running low on air so Ritchie brought her to the anchor line and waved her goodbye. I had about 1,000 psi left in my doubles, so we headed down current to the bow. Through the air space created by his rebreather mouthpiece, he tried to narrate what we were seeing, and it was fairly clear considering he was not wearing a communications unit.

We then traveled along the space between the hull and sea floor—a good place for lobsters to hide. Ritchie spotted one and began digging while I kept my light fixed on where he was working. After a minute he backed up and said, "I need a stick" through



his mouthpiece and we set out to find one. As we crossed over the hull I spot the top half of a fishing pole. Richie was thrilled and we headed back to the bug.

Another few minutes were spent coaxing that lobster out. Every time it was out almost far enough to grab, it'd zip back in too far for us to reach. We eventually admitted defeat—for this time—then continued along the hull toward the stern for a few more minutes. Richie checked my gas, now at about 600 psi, so he gave me the thumbs up and settled me onto the anchor line, waved goodbye and then set off to continue his dive.

While taking a two-minute deep stop at 45 feet, Chatterton passed me on the line where I pretended to be snap underwater photos of him. He smiled, posed and then waved as he continued his ascent. At 20 feet, my dive computer indicated a three-minute obligation with a 10-foot ceiling. I completed an extended stop bringing my total run time to around 45 minutes. Back on board, after a roll call for all the divers, the hook was pulled and we headed home. Richie thanked me for a good dive and said, "Next time we'll get him."

We packed the car, changed and headed across the parking lot to the Shipwreck Grill, which now occupies the spot of the infamous

■ NORWOOD FUND BENEFITS DAN RESEARCH

■ The Michael J. Norwood Memorial Research Fund has been established to advance the research initiatives conducted by Divers Alert Network. Although we still do not know exactly what affected Michael that day, we believe that the underlying cause of his death was something physiological.

It is my hope that through the Michael J. Norwood Memorial Research Fund, DAN will be able to research the many variables that contribute to diver fatalities, educate divers about their findings and advance the development of diving equipment that will ultimately contribute to limiting the number of fatal accidents that occur each year.

Michael would never want his death to affect negatively the diving community in any way. He was fascinated by the sea, its power, beauty and unexplored depths. Michael was never more alive than when he was diving, talking about diving or teaching diving. By creating the Michael J. Norwood Memorial Research Fund, Michael's dedication to the education and safety of the sport will live on.

The fund is structured so that each year a percentage of the interest of the money will be dedicated to research and the remaining interest will be reinvested to grow the fund each year. Those who wish to remember Michael by contributing to the fund can do so online or by check:

To give online with a credit card:
 - Go to www.diversalertnetwork.org/development - Click on Make a Gift & then click on Give by Credit Card - Enter dollar amount - Under "Designate Your Gift," UN-CHECK the box next to "unrestricted" and then check the box next to "The Michael J. Norwood Memorial Research Fund." Follow instructions and complete steps 1, 2 and 3 to send your donation.

To give by check: Make checks payable to Divers Alert Network, The Michael J. Norwood Memorial Research Fund (You can also reference the fund in the lower left corner of the check).

Send checks to: Divers Alert Network The Michael J. Norwood Memorial Research Fund DAN Development 6 W. Colony Place Durham, NC 27705

(This message from Diana Norwood, Michael's widow, was previously published in Alert Diver magazine.) ■

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Harbor Inn, to devour raw oysters, breaded crab cakes, a salad with baby shrimp, rice, roast beef, corn on the cob and the best New England clam chowder I've had in a while.

As the feast wound down, Blue Water owner Dave Riscinti thanked us all for coming then turned the floor over to John and Richie. They too thanked us and a DAN representative for furthering DAN's medical research through this fund.

It was truly a unique and unforgettable experience. How often do you get to spend an entire day with two local divers who found fame with their own History Channel show, yet still find time to dedicate an entire weekend with their fans sharing something we all have in common – a love of wreck diving. Some would consider this a once-in-a-lifetime event, but I am looking forward to diving with them again. I'm holding Richie to his promise of getting that lobster.

Jim Vafeas has been wreck diving for 21 years and teaching for the last 11 through Tiedemann's Diving Center, Levittown, N.Y. Contact Jim at jimv@tdconline.com or through Tiedemann's, www.tdconline.com. 🚩