

On Saturday, April 6, Cindy LaRosa and Kevin Magee went on the first Lake Erie wreck dive of the 2002 season. They went out of Barcelona, NY, on the "Southwind" with Osprey Dive Charters. This was Jim Herbert's first trip of the season in order to check the wreck moorings and install new ones as required. The first clue that this was not a normal dive trip was the snow found covering the boat and dock. Jim's boat was the only one in the water at the marina, and its aft deck was still covered in its blue shrink wrapping with door holes cut in it. The second clue was the 35-40 deg. F air temperature instead of the normal warm summer temperatures. Nevertheless, five divers - Ian Marshall, Pat Wolfe, John Gavroy, Cindy, and Kevin - gathered to help prepare for the season.

Because the lake never froze over this winter, it was a pleasant surprise to find that the vast majority of buoys were still intact. The buoys on the "Boland," "Oxford," "Barge F," Betty Hedger," and "Passaic" were all found to be present. The seas started out being rough at 3'-4', but after an hour they calmed to 1'-2' seas. Light snow flurries could be seen in the distance along the shore, and partly sunny skies occasionally illuminated the murky green water that uniformly covered the lake between the north and south shores. Float jugs were replaced on all the wrecks, but no further work was required.

This luck ended with the "Washington Irving" / "Schooner B," which is a two-masted schooner in 120' of water. Cindy and Kevin volunteered to suit up and take down a new mooring line to the old mooring's attachment point. This is on the ship's anchor, which is lying on the bottom next to the starboard side of the bow. The wreck was hooked with a grapple, and Kevin and Cindy entered the water. The water temperature was discovered to be exactly 32 deg F on both Cindy's and Kevin's gauges, and visibility was approximately 2'. These conditions existed from top to bottom, and the bottom was pitch black due to all ambient light being blocked by the poor visibility above. Lights only helped to illuminate the first few feet. The grapple was on the starboard railing somewhere amidships. Swimming towards the bow, the railing abruptly plunged downwards into the mud with no prominent bow sprint being encountered beforehand. Thinking that they may have mistakenly headed in the wrong direction, Kevin and Cindy then followed the railing back past the grapple to the stern where it ended abruptly at the divot for the yawl boat, confirming that they indeed had initially headed in the right direction.

They swam back once again to the bow. Upon reaching the bow with the end of the new mooring line in tow, Cindy's alternate octopus regulator began to free flow. The mooring line was dropped on the bow, and the dive was aborted by swimming back to the grapple hook. As the ascent was begun, Kevin turned off Cindy's tank and donated his long hose to Cindy while switching to his alternate regulator. At 100', however, Kevin's alternate regulator began to free flow as well. With a now limited air supply, Cindy's tank was turned back on, and a very hasty retreat to the surface was performed. Upon surfacing, they were greeted by a snow squall and the hiss of their tanks, which continued during the entire

swim back to the stern of the boat. Total dive time was 15 minutes with a maximum depth of 115'.

The next team of divers, Pat and John, were sent in equipped with double instead of single tanks. They found the new mooring line on the bow, but could not easily locate or manipulate the old mooring's shackle. Instead, the old mooring line was located, and with numb hands they opted to bring this line to the surface instead. Their water temperature readings of 29 and 36 deg. F (average = 32.5 deg. F) confirmed Cindy's and Kevin's earlier readings. Finally, Ian entered the water to try and attach the new line, but discovered that the shackle was hopelessly buried below the lake bottom with the anchor borrowing itself downward into the thick silt below. So, the old mooring line with a new float marker was used instead. The new mooring line was pulled back up and not used.

The next wreck checked was the "Acme," an arched steamer in 130' of water, and it was also found to be missing its mooring line. Ian attempted to locate the old mooring line but found the bottom visibility to be even poorer than on the "Washington Irving." It was so bad he could not navigate around the wreck for more than a few feet and could not locate himself, so he performed a free ascent. The final wreck checked was the "Carlingford," a schooner in 95' of water, and it was yet again found to be missing its mooring buoy. John and Pat dove this wreck and located the old bow mooring line, which was brought to the surface for a new float marker to be attached.

The day ended with calm seas of less than 1', a cloudless sky, and a beautiful setting sun for the boat ride back to Barcelona. Overall, this was the coldest water ever dove on Osprey or for the individual divers. Furthermore, the extremely poor viz made further attempts to check and establish moorings a rather pointless endeavor, especially for some of the deeper wrecks. At the extremely low temperatures found, recreational dive gear is not recommended. The viz and temperatures encountered also suggest that the dive season will be starting late this year. This is probably the result of the lack of ice cover, which has allowed the lake to become extremely stirred up and colder than normal without the insulating, protective cover of the ice. Let's hope conditions improve dramatically as the spring progresses.