

On Sunday, September 2, 2007, eleven divers, including Cindy LaRosa and Kevin Magee, went diving in Lake Erie on Osprey Charter's boat "Southwind" out of Barcelona, NY. The trip was during the Labor Day weekend, and the weather was absolutely perfect with a cloudless, brilliant blue sky, pleasant 75 deg F air temperature, and a gentle north breeze to keep everyone cool. An unusually large number of small boats were seen on the lake enjoying the traditional last day of summer vacation, and the seas were calm at less than 1'. The trip was to the "George J. Whelan," a 220'-long steel ship that was built in 1910 for carrying lumber and was eventually converted to a sandsucker. On the evening of July 29, 1930, the ship ran into a sudden summer squall while carrying a cargo of limestone from Sandusky. The load shifted during the squall, and most of the 21-person crew was sent below deck to rebalance the load. Unfortunately, all perished when the ship suddenly rolled. There were only six survivors, all of whom had remained above deck, and they clung to the overturned hull as the ship drifted for 30 minutes before it finally sank from underneath them. Swimming in the darkness, their voices were heard by a passing ship, which used its searchlight to find them.

Upon entering the water, visibility on the surface was discovered to be about 5'-8', and the surface temperature was 73 deg F. The thermocline was at 60'-65', and 42 deg F water was on the bottom. The mooring was tied to the stern of the ship, which points south. The ship lies almost inverted but slightly on its port side at about a 45-degree angle, exposing the starboard railing on the west side of the wreck. There is a four-bladed propeller with a large rudder behind it, and the mooring is tied to the skeg above the propeller. Because of the angle at which the ship lies, the rudder is turned to about a 90-degree angle to port. Bottom visibility was good at 60'-80', and everything was lit by bright ambient light, although a light helped to see details, especially on the dark undersides of the ship.

The stern's hull contains a square door opening on its side that reveals a corridor with a room to the left and the backside of a wooden stairwell. The room can be seen to contain bunk beds, shelving, and lots of debris, including a blue lamp with the bulb still in it and a lampshade nearby. The stairs, now headed up, previously descend down into the ship. A single curved metal davit can be seen sticking out of the bottom below this opening, and what appears to be the tip of a flag pole can also be seen projecting from the bottom nearby. About 30' off the wreck, one end of a wooden lifeboat is sticking vertically out of the bottom with the other half buried under the silt. The lifeboat is slightly inverted and comes out of the bottom at a 45-degree angle. From the upturned end a block and wire tackle can be seen hanging inside the lifeboat. Several open portholes about 1' in diameter can be seen along the stern, showing how unprepared the ship was for the sudden storm. Peering inside, the interiors of rooms can be seen with jumbled wood paneling and equipment.

At the beginning of the cargo holds, there is a step down to the cargo deck that reveals the front face of the stern house. There is more debris under the ship in this location. The long swim along the ship's length shows open square-shaped scuppers at various places along the bulwark. Open cargo hatches can be seen on the upside down cargo deck. Amidships towards the upturned keel can be seen two small square ducts that emptied from the side of the ship. These were used for sandsucking activities. Upon reaching the bow, a winch can be seen mounted to the cargo deck underneath the wreck. There is also an unknown metal box structure behind it towards the port side. The raised bow house shows at least one entrance from the cargo deck into the interior spaces. Three more open portholes can be seen along the side of the bow, revealing more rooms and their contents. Inside the forward-most porthole are seen the remains of glass lanterns. The front of the bow is partially buried, but a navy-style anchor can be seen mounted in its hawse pipe where the bow meets the bottom. The bow's stem rises off the bottom and curves to meet the keel at the top of the wreck. Looking off the wreck to the west, various pieces of debris can be seen on the bottom stretching to the limits of visibility.

The entire wreck can be dove comfortably at 135', but there are places where 140'-145' can be achieved, especially if one wants to see the undersides of the ship. Bottom time was 20 minutes, total run time was 46 minutes, 25/20 trimix and 100% oxygen were used, and max depth was 145'. For more information and photos of the "Whelan," see Jack Pape's web site at the following address.

<http://www.n2junkie.com/whelan.htm>