

On Monday, September 11, 2006, six divers took off work to go diving in Lake Erie on Osprey Charter's boat "Southwind" out of Barcelona, NY. The trip was originally planned for the elusive "Swallow," but it had been rescheduled for the "Andrew B" several weeks beforehand by popular demand. On the day of the trip, however, the seas were angry, and so it was decided to try the "Crow's Nest" / "Tiller Wreck" / "Oxford" instead. The trip was made out to the site, but the seas were 3'-5' with occasional 6'-7' waves. Nevertheless, one diver attempted to place a new mooring on the wreck and move the old one to a new location. Unfortunately, the conditions proved too difficult, and the end result was neither mooring was usable.

Therefore, the decision was made to go to the "George J. Whelan," a new wreck discovered last season on October 12, 2005, by famed sidescan expert Garry Kozak and Osprey's Jim Herbert. The "Whelan" was a 220' x 40' steel ship built for the lumber trade in 1910, and it was one of the few steel ships built for this trade. After a varied career on the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean, it was a newly converted sandsucker with 21 people aboard when it ran into a sudden summer squall on the evening of July 29, 1930. Despite being a sandsucker, it was carrying a cargo of limestone from Sandusky on this day. The load shifted, and the people below deck perished as they attempted to re-balance the load when the ship suddenly rolled. There were only six survivors who first clung to the overturned hull for 30 minutes before the ship sank and then started swimming for shore. It was dark, but by luck a passing ship heard their voices, used its searchlight to find them, and picked them up.

The seas calmed to only 3'-4' with occasional 5' waves nearer to shore, but only a few divers decided to make the dive since the seas were still treacherous. Once in the water, a strong current from the east was discovered on the surface that extended down to at least 30'. Visibility on the surface was about 8'-10', and the surface temperature was 70 degrees. Upon descending the mooring, a broad thermocline was found between 70' and 90' with 45 degree water below it. The mooring is tied to the stern of the ship, which points south. There is a four-bladed propeller with a large rudder mounted behind it, and the mooring is tied to the skeg. Because of the angle at which the ship lies, the rudder is turned to about a 90 degree angle to port. The ship lies almost inverted but slightly on its port side at about a 45 degree angle, exposing the starboard railing. Bottom visibility was good with 60'-80' viz, and everything was dimly lit by ambient light, although a light was first needed until the eyes adapted.

The stern's hull contains a fairly large open door on its side that reveals a corridor with rooms and a stairwell in it. The first room can be seen to contain bunk beds and a lot of wooden debris. The wooden stairs, now headed up, previously descend down into the ship. A single curved metal davit can be seen sticking out from under the stern below this opening, and various other pieces of unidentifiable debris can be seen sticking out of the bottom nearby. About 30' off the wreck, one end of a wooden lifeboat can be seen sticking out of the bottom

with the other half buried under the silt. The lifeboat is inverted and comes out of the bottom at a 45 degree angle. Under the upturned end that sticks out, a block and wire tackle can be seen lying on the bottom. 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 sterncastle. There is more debris under the ship in this location. The long swim along the cargo deck shows open scuppers at various locations along the bulwark. Upon reaching the bow, a winch can be seen mounted to the deck underneath the wreck. There is also an unknown metal box structure behind it towards the port side. The raised forecastle shows at least one entrance from the cargo deck into the interior spaces. More open portholes can be seen along the side of the bow, revealing more rooms and their contents. 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 out into the debris field to the west, various pieces of equipment can be seen but were not investigated.

The entire wreck can be seen comfortably at 135', but there are places where 140'-145' can easily be achieved, especially if one wants to see the undersides of the ship. Due to the dicey topside conditions, bottom time was kept short at 15 minutes, total run time was 36 minutes, 20/35 trimix and 100% oxygen were used, and max depth was 142'. For more information and photos of the "Whelan," see Jack Pape's excellent web site at the following address.

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