

On Monday, April 25, 2005, while the snow was still melting in Cleveland from the most recent spring storm, Ann Stephenson, Cindy LaRosa, and Kevin Magee met in snow-free Panama City, FL, to go diving. They boarded the 48' aluminum crew boat "Tropical Sun Nola" for an all-day trip to some of the artificial wrecks for which the area is known. Despite a large storm the previous day, the Gulf of Mexico was calm with 1' seas and a mild air temperature of 68 deg F. The sky was partly sunny, but overcast clouds moved in throughout the day, making it feel cooler towards the end.

The first dive was on the "Two Tugs," two steel tugs purposely sunk in 105' of water. They were originally sunk to form a T-shaped arrangement on the bottom. After a hurricane several years ago, they were found to be nose to nose, and after the devastating hurricanes last year, no one had dove them to see what shape they were in. The tie-in diver surfaced to report the two tugs were once again in a T-shaped arrangement but with one tug now resting on top of the other. James, a recently certified diver from Kentucky, joined the three Cleveland divers as they geared up to go in. It was later learned that this was James' first wreck dive, and he did fine. The first tug was found with its bow pointing W and all of its superstructure cut off, leaving just the hull and deck openings. A 3-bladed propeller is visible with the rudder turned to starboard. The stern deck opening features a large electric drive or generator inside the hull. There is another opening amidships, but it is now bisected by the bow of the second tug. The second tug cuts into the starboard side and stops only upon reaching the first tug's port gunwale. Twisted hatch combing is evident, but otherwise there appears to be no damage as the second tug almost surgically cut into the first tug. Moving around to the other side of the intruding hull, a large capstan can be seen on the first tug's bow. A bow deckhouse outline is evident with some minor openings in the deck, and a tiled bathroom floor is visible on the starboard side with the outline of a shower stall still easily discerned despite the cutter's torch. The bow has a rubber tire bumper mounted on the stem, and hawse pipes are evident but no anchors.

The second tug has its superstructure intact and is a more interesting wreck. It has been made "diver safe" with large openings cut into the superstructure, and the engine room roof has been removed where the smokestack(s) formerly penetrated. Also removed are most of the fittings and equipment. In the engine room part of a single rowed 7-cylinder engine remains with the top removed to expose the cylinders. Penetration of the two levels of superstructure is easy, and the interior can be fully explored. The 3-bladed propeller is half buried in sand, and the rudder is turned to port. The top of the rudderpost can be seen on the aft deck with the steering quadrant attached. On the bow is a large capstan that is curiously offset to the port side.

Large schools of amberjack and Atlantic spadefish surrounded the wrecks, and the fish could be viewed even after leaving the wreck while on the anchor line. There was a mild current on the bottom, a moderate current in the mid-water,

and almost no current near the surface. The water temperature was the same as the air temperature, 68 deg F, making many divers feel chilled, especially since they were in 3 mm (1/8") wetsuits, some with hoods and some without. The visibility was 20'-30', which was considered decent, with bright ambient lighting conditions.

The planned second dive was changed because a Navy vessel was holding some sort of training exercise on top of it. Instead, we went to another wreck that turned out to be an excellent choice. It was the "Chippewa," a 205' long former Navy vessel that was purposely scuttled in 105' of water in 1989 by the Navy to serve as a training aid for salvage and demolitions. The vessel was supposedly a tug but instead looks more like a classic military ship without armaments. It was not stripped before sinking, and almost all of its original equipment is in place, including winches, davits, and bits. The bow is sharply raked with a large forward deck, and the entire ship leans to port by about 30 degrees. It is also sunken significantly into the sand. Despite the years of demolitions performed on it, it is still almost completely intact except for discrete explosion holes into the engine room and various other locations on the ship. The only significant damage is the upper wheelhouse, which has just two standing walls left.

There are two intact levels of superstructure with covered breezeways on the sides of the second level. Peering into various doors and openings, the interior can be seen to be a jumble of equipment and wires hanging down from the ceiling. The floor is also covered with a thick layer of sand or silt, and penetration was not attempted because of the challenging nature of this wreck. It is a large ship, and almost all available bottom time is used just swimming around the wreck. Amidships the truss-like antenna mast has fallen into the sand off the port side of the wreck. The stern superstructure features some interesting wing bridge-like features, and the stern deck is large and open.

This wreck is a popular fishing spot, and a great amount of floating fishing line can be found. One diver was snagged by some monofilament fishing line and had to cut it free with shears. Large schools of amberjack and Atlantic spadefish inhabit this wreck with quite a few blue angelfish and butterfly fish, too. After circling the wreck, Kevin was treated to the brief sighting of a 5' shark of an unidentified type, possibly a gray reef shark or bull shark. It quickly swam away in an agitated manner once Kevin swam towards it. Water conditions were identical to the first dive except for a stronger current in the mid-water.

The final dive was a near-shore wreck in 50' of water. It was the "B&B Barge," which was sunk with concrete road bridge decking, complete with concrete railings, lying perpendicular across the deck amidships. The barge has about 5' of relief and is made of steel. Most of the structure is intact except for some holes in the deck near the gunwales. The holes are small, however, and only allow a diver to peak inside rather than enter. The ends of the barge are square in shape with sloping walls under which fish could be seen hiding in the shadows.

A little corral growth was evident on the deck at one end. A sloping sand wall surrounds the perimeter of the barge, and it is obvious the barge sits inside a shallow crater. Seen was at least one large jewfish, although only brief glimpses were obtained by a few divers. Visibility was worse at about 15'-20', and there was no current encountered on this wreck.

Afterwards, the boat headed back to shore just as the weather began to turn worse with increasing wind and dark skies. The next day revealed large 5'-10' waves and heavy rain, so no diving was done. However, it should be pointed out that not a single snowflake was seen. Panama City features many more wrecks than were visited, and it would be nice to go back to the area and see a few more. Thanks for arranging these dives, Ann!