

Le Polynésien

by Alexandre Hache & Graham Owens

It has become a ritual that each day at 6pm, we gather around the laptop and deliberate over the following days program. Today, our 'young' camera operator Matt, will pick the wreck we will dive on tomorrow.

The choice in Malta is always difficult, as it has witnessed some bitter fighting during two world wars and the seabed is littered with high quality wrecks.

It is the 6th day of our "Maltese Deep Wrecks" expedition and I feel fatigue is setting in. I see in the eyes of my five comrades the desire to ease off a little. We have already amassed a total of 500m of cumulative depth and 23 hours underwater including 18 hours of decompression stops.

It is with some trepidation that Matt proposes the wreck of the SS Polynésien. At only 65m deep and with her mid deck at around 55m, she's accessible to experienced recreational divers and wasn't on our original 'deep' itinerary. The Polynésien was a French liner which sunk on the 10th August 1918 after being torpedoed.

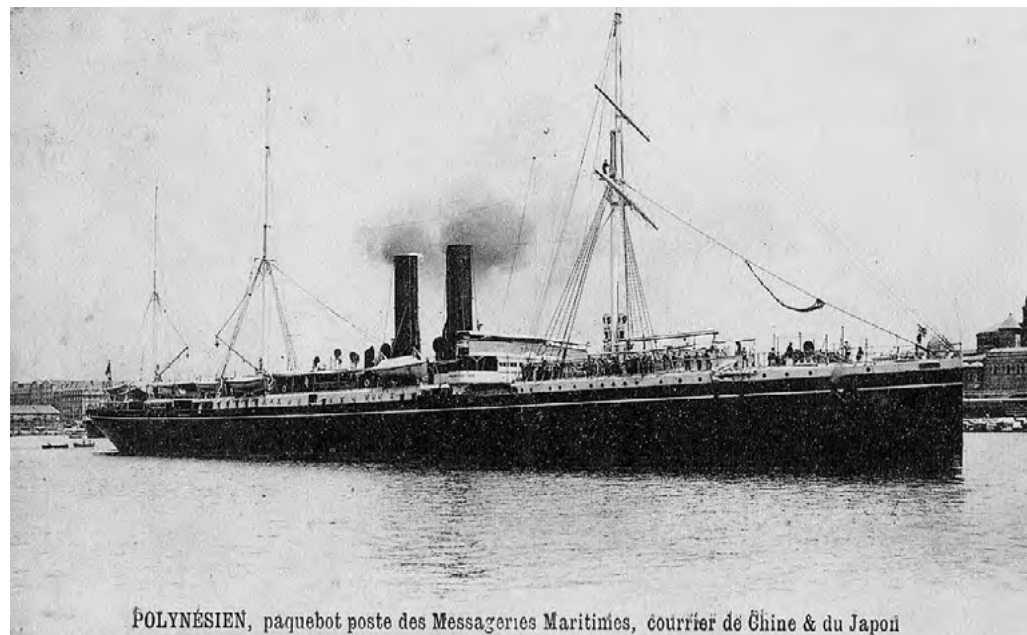
We settle in to watch some videos found on the Internet and the

discussion soon livens up because our original program of wrecks beyond 100m is already well loaded!

Many deep divers have told us about this wreck, describing it as a staple of a Maltese expedition. Our skipper Jason Fenech arrives late and we ask his opinion. His answer is clear: "The Poly? this is a favourite dive for the locals, you guys will have a blast!"

The following morning, at eight o'clock sharp, Jason is waiting for us aboard his boat the Delphino, moored up on the Marina dock in Valletta. We take the heavy equipment out of the vans and take advantage of the loading to analyse our Trimix 11/48 mixtures (11% oxygen, 48% helium) before setting out to sea. Morale is running high; the weather is nice and warm; it feels like a vacation! My dive buddy Philippe and I take the opportunity to launch the drone. This is the first time since the start of our stay that we have admired the citadel that our boat circumvents before setting off.

The Polynésien sank 7 miles off the coast of Valletta, so we take advantage of the thirty minutes journey for a final briefing and to



*AATH tech team, Alexandre, Jason, Didier, Matt, Olivier & Nicolas , SONY A7R4
©Philippe Clement*





Jason Fenech expedition boat, "Delphino", SONY A7R4 ©Philippe Clement

get prepared. Arriving at the dive site, Jason, helped by Karsten the deckhand, positions the shot line. It is when we see the image on the sounder screen that we discover this extraordinary wreck; 153 meters long by 15 wide with a draft of 10 meters!

Built in the South of France in La Ciotat, the Polynesien was launched on April 18, 1890 in the presence of the President of the Republic, Sadi Carnot. Commissioned by the Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes de Marseille, it operated on the France to Australia route from 1891.

She was a fast ship and was engaged in November 1892 in a race from Adelaide with the twin propellered Orient Line's Ophir liner. Un-hampered by her single propeller, the Polynesien arrived in Marseille 22 hours ahead of the British liner.

In 1900 she took part in the war

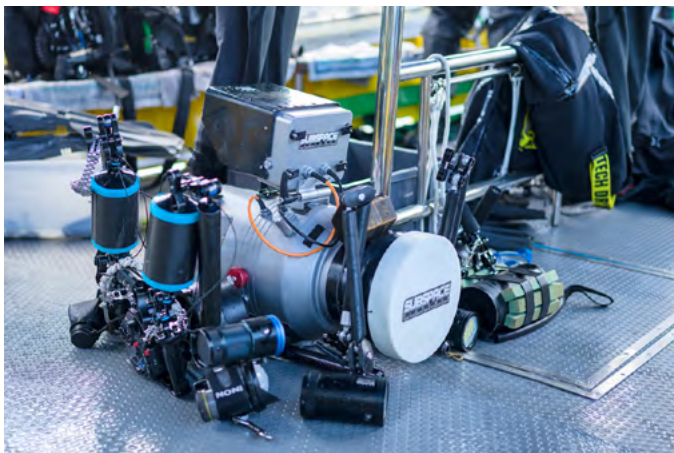


Open skylight to accommodation (first class), Lumix S 1/30s F8 1600 iso ©Alexandre Hache

effort by transporting the troops of the China Expedition from Marseille to Colombo. Later assigned to the Far East route from 1903, she was

the victim of two broken moorings in Marseille causing two strandings and some damage, fortunately without consequences for the ship.

In the midst of World War I, she once again joined the routes to Australia and New Caledonia and provided troop transportation from



Video, Photo cameras and 65k lumens Bigblue lighting , SONY A7R4 ©Philippe Clement

Indochina. Le Polynésien was torpedoed on August 10, 1918 in the Malta Channel by the German submarine type UC-22, causing the loss of twenty lives.

Our group of six divers are divided into three teams.

The first to get into the water is Matt and Olivier; long-time friends and accomplices, they will set off with the expedition main underwater camera, a Sony FX-9 which shoots 4K video to an external recorder. Mounted in an underwater housing capable of depths down to 250m it is accompanied by two 33,000 lumen Big Blue video lights each providing a phenomenal amount of light.

The launching of this bulky 35kg baby is normally a delicate operation, but today the sea is calm! Olivier will carry an additional light; this time a 65,000 lumen Big Blue to complement his 150W dual beam primary hand light.

A few minutes later, it was Didier's turn to get into the water, accompanied by Nicolas. They are



Rear gun, 2x Bigblue 65K lumens, Lumix S 1/60 F4 1600iso ©Alexandre Hache

equipped with a Panasonic GH5 in an Isota housing rated to a depth of 200m. More video-orientated, their configuration still allows you to take photos from time to time. The previous day, Nicolas had a leak on the inflator of his dry suit at a depth of more than 100m, depriving his team a good dive on the destroyer ORP Kujawiak, they therefore opt for a

long dive today. Didier has calculated a run time of four and a half hours which gives them an effective bottom time of ninety minutes.

It's our turn now, but there's no rush. Our nearly five hours dive the day before leads us to consider something more a bit more sedate today.

Equipped, we begin our unchanging ritual



Bottles in the SS Polynesian holds, Lumix S 1/30s F6,3 400iso
©Alexandre Hache

of the final pre-jump checks of our rebreathers, it is a key moment in diving. Isolated in our bubble, we are both focused and relaxed. I finish by checking the partial pressure of oxygen in my loop and with an “OK” sign, I indicate to the skipper that I am ready.

As the boat approaches the release point, I stand up, weighed down with my 60 kg of equipment. I remember saying to my buddy Philippe “it’s light today!”. We “only” have two bailouts in addition to our

rebreathers, this is in contrast to the 120 kg for a more typical dive in the 100 meter zone, which would feature three or even four bail-outs.

Ready to jump, I hold on firmly to the rail while waiting for Jason to manoeuvre into the final position. I jump into the water and fin about ten meters to the buoy, Philippe joins me moments later. I unfold the arms of my camera and remove the cover protecting the dome. The water is very clear at the end of summer in Malta. The descent along the shot



Alexandre Hache shooting on the deckhouse, GH5S 1/128 F4 3200 iso
©Didier Sala

line is rapid and we soon see the wreckage.... it is huge!

We arrive at the mid ship and it is difficult for us to guess the wreck’s orientation. With 10,300 tons of the Polynesian in front of us, everything is excessive. The boilers are impressive and the passageways offer breath-taking perspectives. We quickly understand that a single dive, however long, will not allow us to explore her properly.

I see an entrance that gives us access to the holds and this seems like

a good place to start our exploration. Lit by our powerful lights, we can make out water, wine and Champagne bottles and dishes (the wreck is known locally as Tal-Platti, ‘plate ship’ in Maltese). Continuing our way through the maze of metal, we discover tyres of bicycles, motorcycles and suitcases. What is particularly impressive in Malta is the state of conservation of the artifacts from the wrecks. Unlike the remains of the French coast, everything is present as it was on the day of the sinking, offering divers a



SS Polynesian pergola, Lumix S 1/60s F4 700iso ©Alexandre Hache



Intact rudder & propeller, Bigblue 65k lumens, Lumix S 1/128 F4 3200iso ©Alexandre Hache

and we slowly make our way back along the hull to the shot line.

It is with some regret that we begin our ascent and the long decompression stops that follow; the sixty-five minutes bottom time has barely allowed us to touch “the Poly” as the locals affectionately call her. One thing is for sure, this wreck will be on the program of our next Maltese trip.

**Alexandre Hache
& Graham Owens**

[Instagram](#)

real journey back in time.

The strobes of my camera ‘pop’ and Philippe enjoys playing with his lighting to perfect the atmosphere. We swim through several areas, including a dining room with tables. Time passes quickly, and as we leave the holds we come across the other two divers. They approach and looking through their masks, I can see a sparkle in their eyes. With a gesture, they indicate the direction to take and we conclude that “this is where it happens”!

We relieve Olivier of his powerful 65,000 lumen ‘searchlight’ and make our way to what we will later know to be the stern. The superstructures are still there, in over a hundred years it has done its job. We advance towards the almost intact pergola, covered with yellow and red soft corals. It is very photogenic but time is running out and we continue our journey, passing over the skylights of the first class cabins.

A shadow in the distance slowly emerges, Wow! It is a magnificent

cannon which sits on the aft platform of the ship. Quick! We position the lights and I gain height to frame this imposing piece of artillery. The visibility starts to deteriorate as the sandy bottom is disturbed by a light current. We swim around the stern to admire the rudder and single propeller below. Their size is such that our two huge lights struggle to illuminate them in their entirety. A glance at my dive computer reminds me that we are going to exceed the planned three hours of diving. I signal to Philippe



Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter No
White Balance



Digital - No Filter Manual
White Balance



Magic Filter Manual
White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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