

Available darkness

by Pat Morrissey



Scapa Flow is an almost land-locked area of water to be found at the northernmost tip of the British Isles. At the end of the First World War, while negotiations over the terms of armistice were still going on and being fine-tuned, seventy-four ships of the German Imperial Fleet lay at anchor in the Flow. Admiral Ludwig Von Reuter, relying on reports in the four day old newspapers which were his only source of information as to how the negotiations were going, came to believe that the British might well soon want to take his fleet and use them to attack his country's defences; and so there came about what might be regarded as the most magnificently futile of naval gestures, the order to scuttle the whole German fleet where it lay, in order to deny the enemy any use or advantage of it.

I had been to the Orkneys

once before, and attempted in vain to wrest a few decent images from its cold, black waters. The German wrecks which remain on the seabed – most were salvaged for scrap in the decades following the final peace treaty – are habitually swept by strong currents, and are often at depths somewhere between 35 and 45 metres. These are conditions which challenge the underwater photographer, and in preparation for this return trip I was careful to take the TDI Advanced Nitrox course, to go with a group of experienced technical divers, and to try a different tack on the photographic front. It was suggested to me that the best hope lay in simplifying my approach to the problem. Forget trying to use a strobe and recording nothing but backscatter: how much of a battleship could I hope to illuminate, anyway? Far better to concentrate on making the most of

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whatever available light there might be.

I have to admit that it looked pretty damned dark to me as I descended the various shotlines each day, but my mentors had been right: keeping things as simple as possible, I abandoned my housed Nikon F4 and went back to the Nikonos V. I set it on Aperture priority, and loaded up with black-and-white Agfa Scala slide film which can be pushed (according to the manufacturers) to 1600 ASA; this way, I figured, all I would have to do was hang on to any available



Top left. Flash adds colour and detail but introduces backscatter
Top right. The long shutter speed has blurred the diver and his bubbles.

Right. Extremes of contrast should be avoided as the cameras exposure system cannot cope.



part of the wreckage to offset the slow shutter speeds, compose the shots and let the camera do its own calculations for me.

At that depth, and in cold and current-prone conditions, this was just about all I would have time to do; and I was delighted when I saw the results. The human figures might be slightly blurred, since they had the annoying habit of moving and breathing instead of merely freezing, but the extended exposure allowed far more of the overall scene to come through on the final images than I'd ever seen before. It was the scale of the wrecks to the divers that was most striking, along with the flared beams that issued from torches like light sabres.

The whole scene became eerily atmospheric, and oddly reminiscent of the opening scenes of the sci-fi film *Alien* – tiny human figures floating down towards armoured metal plate twisted and crumpled like paper, mere insects pitting themselves against vast, looming structures.

I'll be back again next year.

Pat Morrissey