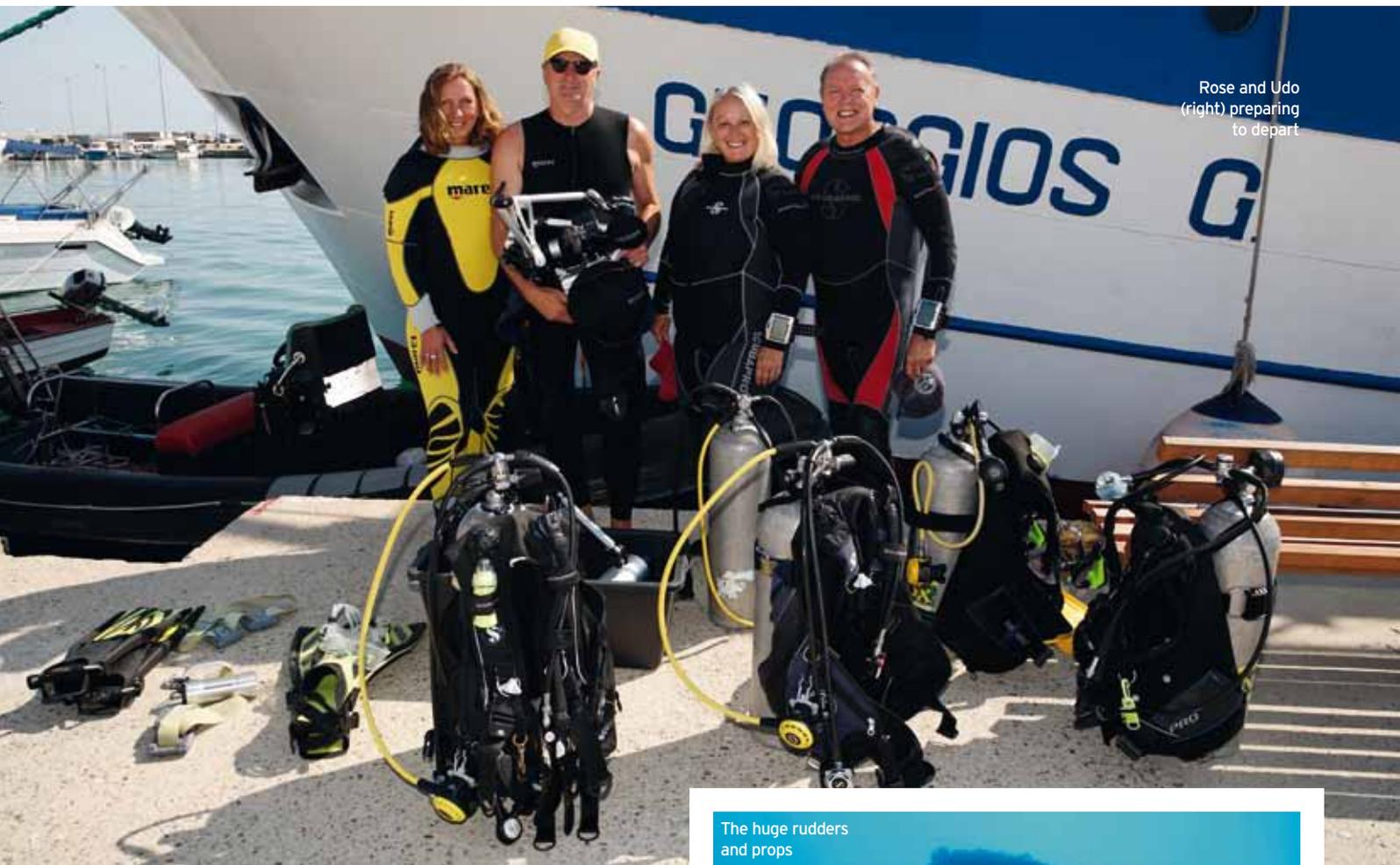




THE WRECK OF THE *Zakynthos*

One rarely gets the opportunity to dive a relatively unknown wreck, especially in the Mediterranean. **UDO AND ROSE KEFRIG** were fortunate to be among the first dive teams to visit the Zakynthos

Photographs by **UDO KEFRIG** / TEAM OCEANPICS.DE



Rose and Udo (right) preparing to depart

Thursday 28 December 1989, 3.30pm - the harbour of Kyllini. A high, south-easterly wind battered the coastline, and large waves pushed against the harbour wall. The sea looked grey and menacing. Black storm clouds under which a grey sheet of rain was falling were obstructing the view over the tiny harbour. Under rapidly changing lightning conditions, the first trucks rolled into the parking bay - the tanker trucks on a mission to supply the islands with fuel - and wait to board the ferry back to Zakynthos. Finally, Sabbas Xenofos, the Captain of the MV Zakynthos, gave the order to open the huge tail door. It was a daily routine for him and his team, and soon the trucks were onboard, complete with 250,000 litres of fuel.

At 4.15pm, the ferry left punctually. The wind had freshened to 50kph. While the crew was busy with their routine, the lorry drivers headed to the cafeteria - due to the amount of fuel carried, there were no other passengers or tourists on board. Outside the storm was raging and rain was battering the ferry. Within a few minutes, the wind had gathered speed and energy.

By 4.45pm, the white-capped waves keep rolling in, taking the men on a rollercoaster ride. A sudden, north-easterly gust of wind tossed the Zakynthos like a ball and suddenly everything seemed to turn. In the hold, the lorries started to shift on the oil-slicked floor. Full of fright, the drivers headed outside, clinging to the portside railing. The list of the ship was preventing them moving forward, so the Captain tried to head toward mainland Kalkalithra.

By 5.05pm, the Captain noticed that damage had been done to the hydraulic rudder, and that the manual rudder was not responding anymore. Immediately he placed a distress call. With the help of his second officer Spiro Giakoumelou, they managed to hold course toward land. Meanwhile, the Mayday call had reached the Dilos, hurrying from Kyllini. Under the responsibility of the Water Protection Commandant Jannis Gi-

The huge rudders and props



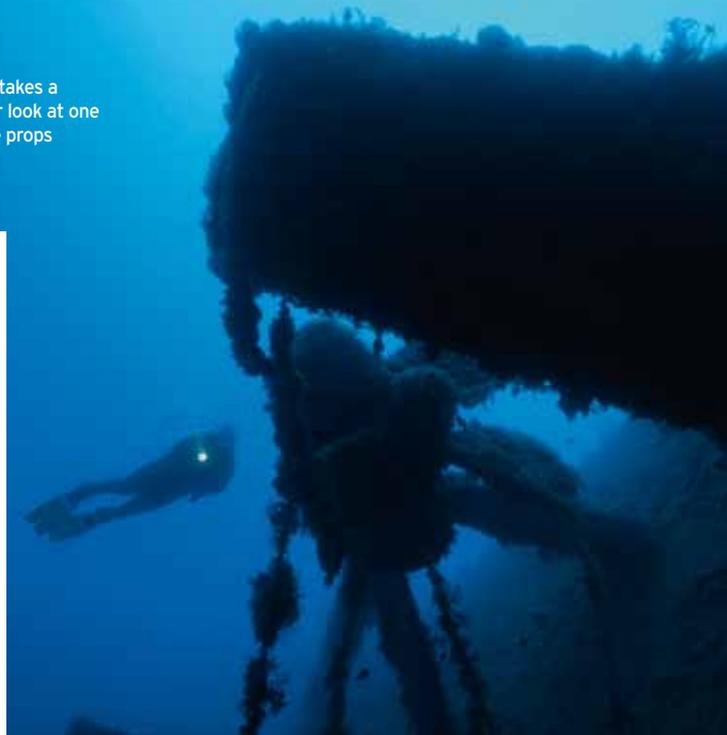
“The first 15m we saw nothing, only blue water, then suddenly, at 28m, a dark shape loomed out of the deep”

“As we ventured further into the belly of the stricken ferry, we could see how the explosion had torn a huge hole into the midsection of the ferry, through which a diver can easily reach the outside again”

Rose takes a closer look at one of the props



Algae covers this seat on the deck



otgiakos, the Protheus on the island of Zakynthos left the harbour. Back on the ferry, the drivers and crew noticed a strong smell of petrol - the lorries had started to lose huge amounts of their dangerous load. Out of fear that a spark may ignite and cause a fire, a crewmember rushed to the bridge to inform the captain. He stopped the engine.

At 5.15pm, the order to abandon ship was given, but unfortunately, due to the badly listing ship, the lifeboats were rendered useless. Fear, panic and desperation were spreading. One lorry driver tried to leap into the sea, others used ropes to scramble into the dinghies.

Between 5.40pm and 6pm, a series of loud booming sounds came from within the ship's belly, followed by three explosions. The force blew the door off, and the cargo area began to flood. Captain Xenofos and his first machinist Psavromatis Dionisis continued to send their co-ordinates with a walkie-talkie, jumping into the icy water as the ship sank beneath them.

Around 7pm, rain, heavy swell and high wind speeds of over 70mph forced the Protheus to turn around, but the Dilos refused to give up and



Safety stop at the end of another dive



The prop blades are immense

maintained course to the scene of the accident and last-given location. Strong, gleaming light beams searched the dark night and roaring sea and finally, the light caught the rafts. Not a minute too soon, the exhausted crew and lorry drivers were rescued, but tragically the captain, the machinist and the lorry driver who jumped over the railing were missing.

At 8pm, flares shot into the pitch-black sky and eerily lit up the area. The churning waves turned minutes into hours. Finally, good news for family and colleagues - the captain and machinist had been found safe. Sadly, it was too late for the driver; his body was found the next day, with fatal injuries sustained in the desperate jump.

26 years later...

Off the coast of Kyllini, the wreck of the ferry Zakynthos lies forgotten on the seabed. However, the Nero-Sport Dive Centre (www.nero-sport.de), managed by Dennis and Peter Mohr, wouldn't let go of the idea to dive the 87-metre-long, 1,600-tonne wreck. After careful planning, research and to obtain permits, they finally headed out to search for the ferry, but to no avail. After yet another fruitless search, a random chat with an old fisherman pointed them in the right direction - it transpired that all



Marine growth covers the wreckage

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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given co-ordinates had been wrong!

On 24 July 2015, we received a call in our German office from Peter in Greece. "Hey you, shutterbug, fancy coming down to Zakynthos? I found this wreck, are you interested?" You don't pose this question to underwater photographer Udo Kefrig twice. Two hours later, the flights were booked, the ever-ready packed suitcases were hoisted into the car and we sped off to the airport. That same evening the trailer was packed at the Nero-Sport Dive Centre and final preparations were made.

Zakynthos Harbour on 25 July was busy, but eventually the hundreds of tourists and long lines of cars and lorries were safely onboard. All of a sudden the wind started blowing, the sky darkened and raindrops fell – it was like 1989 all over again. Was this a bad omen? Thankfully, the rest of the trip turned out to be calm and the rain turned to drizzle.

From the harbour of Kyllini, we were supposed to head to the wreck. We had always looked longingly at the beautiful yachts laying in the harbour, wondering who they may be belong to, but the small rubber dinghy Peter was sitting in did not quite fit our description of comfort! There was no time for any doubts, as Peter hurried us along, saying the harbour police had issued a warning of bad weather. Fifteen minutes later we headed out to sea as the first fishing boats turned back to the safety of the harbour. Over the slapping waves I watched as Udo fished his bouncing equipment to safety as we continued to head toward the wreck. It wasn't long before Peter throttled back the engines and gave the order to get ready. After the final buddy check and safety instructions, we made an elegant backward roll into the water.

We dived down into the crystal-clear water of the Mediterranean. The first 15m we saw nothing, only blue water, then suddenly, at 28m, a dark shape loomed out of the deep. As discussed, we headed toward the stern of the ship. She now lies on her starboard side resting on a sandy seabed. The tailgate is torn off and lays alongside the ship. Cautiously we glided forward. For divers who do not suffer from claustrophobia and possess good buoyancy control, the inside of the ferry offers a fascinating view of the lorries. The trucks have pushed together and lie on their sides. A few of them have been twisted into bizarre forms of rusted metal. Careful not to stir up the sediment, I took a closer look. The windows are smashed; there are tins and mattresses strewn around. It is a thrill to dive through this wreck. Natural daylight falls through the portholes, leaving the inside frozen in an eerie light.

Udo was busy trying to take as many photos as possible, the flash from his camera disturbing small fish. As we ventured further into the belly of the stricken ferry, we could see how the

A truck inside the ferry



Exploring along the deck level



explosion had torn a huge hole into the midsection of the ferry, through which a diver can easily reach the outside again. The bright lights of our dive buddies shone toward us; they were surfacing. Further highlights were the propellers, chimneys, the rudders and lifeboats. The wreck is overgrown with algae and sponges. It was fantastic how 'virgin' it felt. Slowly we surfaced. The wind had stopped, and the sea was as smooth as glass. Peter was right! It was an incredible feeling to dive an almost-unexplored wreck. And for all wreck fans this will be made much easier. In future, the comfortable, 12-metre-long motor catamaran Cat-Cat will take divers to the site. For us, this can only mean 'We will be back!' Soon, very soon... ■