

CHAPTER SEVEN

INTO THE CORRYVRECKAN WHIRLPOOL

In amongst this great rush to find new virgin wrecks in deeper waters there were also gems of occasions where our Trimix diving didn't involve a new shipwreck at the end of it. To practice our skills we would sometimes dive deep down sheer rock walls on the west coast of Scotland, Ewan and Chris Allen being the first of our group to reach the magical 100-metre depth.

On one occasion in 2000 we used our newfound skills to dive the Corryvreckan Whirlpool – the stuff of legends. As a child I grew up hearing romantic tales of boats and ships being caught in it and sucked down with their unfortunate sailors into the depths of the monster. Although the name was familiar, my only idea of it was a childhood memory of a hand drawn colour image in *Look & Learn* magazine. A small boat was being spun round and round as it was sucked down into a perfect whirlpool. For most of my life I had had no idea where it was – and certainly never envisaged that one day I would dive into its heart.

As my involvement with the sea grew throughout my diving career, I became more aware of the Corryvreckan Whirlpool. It is the third largest whirlpool in the world and takes centre stage in the Gulf of Corryvreckan, a small channel of water just over half a mile wide that separates the Isle of Jura from the smaller island of Scarba on the West Coast of Scotland, south of Oban.

The Corryvreckan Whirlpool is perhaps the most feared strip of water around Britain. When the whirlpool is in full motion, the half-mile wide gulf is a very dangerous place to be. Tales abound of boats and ships being caught in it and sucked down into oblivion. Such is its danger that the Royal Navy has classed the channel as unnavigable and the lifeboat has been called out to over 50 emergencies there in recent years. Currents can reach 16 knots and its roar can be heard 10 miles away. Standing waves ten feet high breaking endlessly reveal that there is some massive obstruction on the seabed.

To the west of the Gulf of Corryvreckan is the Atlantic – open water all the way to America. To the east of the gulf is the Sound of Jura and then mainland Scotland.

It seems as though the whole of the Atlantic tries to funnel through this small half-mile wide channel, pushing colossal amounts of water on the flood towards Scotland. This tidal action has scoured out a massive chasm in the gulf more than 200 metres deep. In the middle of this chasm, trying to block the might of the Atlantic stands a pinnacle of solid rock that reaches up from a depth of 200 metres to just 30 metres short of the surface. The top of the pinnacle is about 100 feet wide and it widens as it drops down towards the bottom of the chasm 200 metres below. The standing waves visible on the surface are caused as the onrushing tide is forced up and over the Pinnacle before dropping instantly back down into the chasm. An underwater waterfall is created with fierce down currents.

A story – now part of Scottish diving folklore – tells of how many years ago, a brave diver tried to dive the pinnacle. He made it down to the pinnacle all right, but the down-currents got hold of him. He inflated his buoyancy jacket – normally enough to send a diver to the surface like a rocket – but he kept going down. He dropped his weight belt gaining more buoyancy – but still he kept going down. The current took him down to the incredible depth of 75 metres before he broke loose and reached up to the surface. The pinnacle has only rarely been dived.

Scientists had been keen to study the pinnacle but were denied permission to dive under HSE regulations because of the great depths, and the great currents. As sport divers, we were not bound by those rules – so when an Edinburgh TV director (who had trained Ewan to dive in his early days) wanted a team of experienced divers to dive the pinnacle for an *Equinox* documentary entitled *Maelstrom* (part of the *Lethal Seas* series), Ewan got the call.

Ewan was very quickly on the phone to me asking if I'd be interested. My initial reaction was that this was a crazy thing to do, but he persisted and eventually I agreed.

Very shortly after that I found myself arriving at Oban on a Saturday morning to meet a team led by the experienced Trimix diver Graeme Bruce, which was made up of Ewan, myself, Jim Burke, Dave Hadden, David Ainsley and Jack Morrison.

The plan was to do a work-up dive in the Falls of Lora, almost directly underneath the Connell Bridge in Oban itself. The Falls of Lora take centre stage in a tight bottleneck channel, which separates Loch Etive from the open sea. The seabed at the Falls is scoured with hundreds of canyons and gorges, which lead to a massive pit or hole where the seabed drops off to about 45 metres.

I had seen the full might of the Falls in action on many occasions. The name is a wee bit of a misnomer as there is no actual waterfall or series of rocky rapids – just the tight bottleneck channel. But that channel is a special place, for a raging torrent of white water and standing waves reveal the presence of the underwater canyons and waterfalls.

On previous visits to Oban I have looked in awe at the Falls. On one occasion I saw a motor yacht trying to make its way up through the Falls in an effort to break through into the upper reaches of Loch Etive. Each time the yacht took a run at the Falls, engine roaring, it failed and was driven back. This was going to be some shake-down dive and I must admit to feeling apprehensive about this dive itself – let alone the Corryvreckan Whirlpool the following day.

We were dropped into the water up-current to seaward of the Falls on the flood tide and descended some 20 metres into an area of canyons scoured by the currents. We found ourselves drifting at speed up river as we approached the main event – the Falls of Lora

themselves. Here the water plunges over an underwater cliff invisible from topside – which drops off from a depth of 20 metres to in excess of 40 metres. We had been told that once we went over the edge of the cliff there was no way we could break free from the current. We just had to go with the flow, literally. Once it bottomed-out we would be able to rise up and would find ourselves in calmer water. I wondered if Corryvreckan could be worse than what I now expected to face.

Abruptly the canyons petered out and I thought this meant that the cliff was imminent. I don't like being out of control on a dive and had a strong sense of foreboding about the cliff. But mercifully the cliff never appeared and quite suddenly the current just started to ease off and drop away. We had passed by on the southern side of the cliff and were now past it and into calmer water. We had got off lightly.

That night we headed down to a small pub at the Bridge over the Atlantic – a small bridge that connects the mainland to a small island and so bridges the Atlantic. We had agreed to meet there to conduct the briefing for the next day's dive into the whirlpool, and the ever-present TV director would be there to film.

As we went into the pub we found that the locals had been ushered along to one end of the bar to make way for a number of bright TV lights on stands. They eyed us quizzically as we entered. "Here's the mad divers away to dive the whirlpool", you could almost hear them muttering quietly.

Shots were taken outside of Ewan arriving in his car at the pub and then we moved inside to film the next sequential shot of Ewan entering the pub. In between shooting the outside shot and coming into the bar however, Ewan had taken off his jacket. Once the interior scene had been shot this lack of continuity was noticed and so he had to put it on, go outside and do his big walk in scene again.

We all sat around a beaten circular copper bar table, bought in some beers and laid out charts of the Gulf of Corryvreckan to study. David Ainsley, who runs the hugely respected charter dive boat *Porpoise*, was taking us out to the gulf the next day. He knew the waters there well.

David went on to brief us on the latest weather forecast – and it wasn't looking good. The wind was already gusting strongly and a Force 8 was now expected the next day, which might well put paid to the dive on the whirlpool.

Nevertheless, although there was a real chance that the dive would be off, we still went through the motions of the dive briefing for the TV camera. There was a sense of unreality about the whole thing. Here we were, planning to dive the most dangerous dive in British waters and now there was a Force 8 forecast to boot. Surely the dive would be called off.

Waking on the day of the dive, I was immediately struck by the noise of the wind whipping around our B&B. Getting up and throwing on some warm clothes I went outside, to be joined by Ewan. As the force of the wind buffeted us both we looked at each other and agreed that the dive would most probably be off.

Ewan phoned the TV director who told us to go down to the small harbour where the *Porpoise* was berthed – a decision about whether the dive was on would then be made. As I ate breakfast I was feeling a little relieved at the thought of the dive being called off.

After breakfast we collected our gear from our room and made the short drive down to the harbour. There, all the divers were arriving and loading their gear into the *Porpoise*. The wind howled about and I was by this stage absolutely convinced that the dive would be

called off. I suspected that we were just not being told as yet so that the TV director could film the actual disappointment (or relief) on our faces as the announcement was made on the quayside. Nevertheless I loaded my gear into the boat and got changed in the lee of a stark concrete fish house into my warm diving undersuit.

Once all the kit and divers were aboard we were filmed as the *Porpoise* cast off and we headed out to open water. The wind still howled around and I thought that if the dive was going to be called off, now was the time, but the *Porpoise* kept going – and kept going. Because of the lie of the surrounding islands the skipper felt he could find shelter and run all the way to the Gulf of Corryvreckan without getting into the stormy weather, which would be found in exposed waters.

After being convinced in my own mind for the last 12 hours that the dive was not going ahead, I had to come to terms with the fact that after all, I was now about to be pitched into the heart of the Corryvreckan Whirlpool. Perhaps it was just as well it turned out like that – at least I had slept well the night before.

The *Porpoise* left the small harbour at about 9.00 a.m. and, although sea conditions were fairly lumpy, we had a surprisingly comfortable two-hour ride out to the gulf.

At first there was a lot of nervous gallows humour as we headed out across the Sound of Jura. The divers busied themselves setting up their dive gear and doing the usual round of kit checks. It was in the back of all of our minds that if the down-currents got hold of us, we could be pulled quite some distance down the side of the pinnacle.

As you have heard endlessly from me by now, the maximum recommended depth for air diving is 50 metres. The depth to the bottom of the pinnacle was 200 metres. If we were to dive it on compressed air and got pulled down the side of the pinnacle to such great depths, the very air we breathed would become toxic and kill us.

As a result I had chosen to dive using a Trimix of 16% oxygen, 45% helium and 39% nitrogen as my bottom mix in my back tanks. This would allow me to survive being pulled down to more than 100 metres. Ewan was going a step further still. He had rigged his much-cherished Inspiration closed-circuit rebreather, now known as Kato, with an even higher helium mixture, which would allow him if necessary to be swept to the bottom of the pinnacle at 200 metres – and survive. No one was intending going below 50–60 metres – but it was comforting to know that if the worst came to the worst, and things went wrong, Ewan could actually stand at the bottom of the pinnacle, look up and at least witness the rest of us casting off this mortal coil.

As we arrived in the Gulf of Corryvreckan everyone on the boat fell silent. The gallows humour petered out as an apprehensive and nervous silence enveloped the *Porpoise*. This was a special place – one of the most foreboding and eerie places I have been in my life. The gulf simply seemed filled with doom, broken only by the cries of a few seagulls. We could see the much-fabled standing waves marking the spot where the pinnacle stood, ominously hidden in the depths.

David Ainsley manoeuvred his boat above into position above the pinnacle and a very heavy shot, made up of two old iron railway grips, was dropped over the side and plunged down into the depths. Once the shot had landed and snagged, the current whipped the rope tight. White water broke around the buoys as the current worked on them, leaving a huge rippling wake as though they were being pulled through the water at speed.

The *Porpoise* would not be tying up to the downline, for even at the weakest tides of the month, there is never a period of absolute slack water on the pinnacle. There is only a short window of about ten minutes of relatively slack water that comes about every six hours as the tide turns. The rest of the time, the force of moving water would work on the hull of the boat with so much strength that even our heavy shot would be easily dragged off. To get the ten minutes of slack water for the divers down on the pinnacle we would have to start the dive before slack water – when the tide was still running.

Once all the divers were prepped the first two took their positions on the gunwales of the boat. David came out from the wheelhouse to give us a final briefing on the conditions and how the dive had to be run. He told us that the tide was now starting to drop away towards the ten minutes of slack water. After the short period of slack, the tide would pick up fiercely in the opposite direction – and it would be time to get out of there and start the ascent.

We were told that a warning sign that the tide was about to turn would be when all the small crabs which we would see on the pinnacle, darted for cover. They presumably had learnt through experience that if they didn't get tucked away in some nook or cranny that they would end up being swept over the side of the pinnacle for a long 200-metre fall into the chasm. No doubt that would be a long climb back up for a wee crab.

We were ominously told that when the air bubbles we breathed out started going downwards we should get the hell out of there – that would mean that the current was escalating dramatically. We were told to put buoyant gas into everything we could, by bleeding air into our drysuits, into our buoyancy wings and by sending up our deco bags on our reels – together that should be sufficient to support us and get us clear of the down currents. Finally, David added a sobering warning: “Conditions today are not ideal – no one is forced to go in on this dive. There is no pressure on anybody to do so.” But we were all now committed and psyched up for the dive. There was no going back – none of us were going to wimp out at this stage.

David took the *Porpoise* up beside the buoys and was able to assess the tidal flow at that time as being between 2.4 and 2.9 knots (a diver can only swim against ½ knot of current at best). He then took the boat about 30 feet up-current to where he would drop us. By the time we were in the water and had righted ourselves we should be drifting up to the buoys.

It was time to go – the dive was on.

The first two divers rolled backwards into the water on David's signal, righted themselves and grabbed hold of the shot-line as they drifted with the current. A quick round of 'OK' signals to each other and the boat and they slipped under the water and started the descent to the pinnacle.

Once they had cleared the buoys it was time for Dave Hadden and myself to go. I pulled myself awkwardly up from the bench where I had got kitted up and made my way to the gunwale. It was hard work in a pitching boat carrying two heavy 12 litre tanks on my back, two 9 litre tanks of deco mix, one under either arm, my weights and all the other paraphernalia necessary to survive down in the depths. I sat down on the gunwale and Dave Hadden clumped down beside me. The skipper gave the signal that we were in position again and, hearts racing, Dave and I rolled over backwards, dropping over the side of the boat heavily into the water a few feet below.

As the usual explosion of white water and bubbles that greets a diver on entry disappeared, I righted myself quickly and looked down-current, searching for the buoys and line. All my

earlier fears and foreboding had disappeared. I was preoccupied with the mechanics of the dive, of getting to the shot-line and not missing it. Sure enough, I was drifting towards the buoys and could see the shot-line leading down from them into the abyss. The underwater visibility looked good – at least 25 metres – and I could see the bubble streams rising up from the two divers ahead of and below me.

As soon as I grabbed the shot-line, the current that had been my friend in drifting me onto the rope, became my enemy and swung me round so my legs streamed out down-current. I kept a firm grip on the rope – if I let go of it I would be off very quickly towards America. I dumped excess buoyant air from my suit and wings and started to laboriously make the descent, hand over hand, inch by inch.

It took Dave and I just a few minutes to haul our way down to the top of the pinnacle and we found that although the top of the pinnacle is at a depth of 30 metres, the shot had snagged down one side of it at about 40 metres.

Initially I thought that the pinnacle was devoid of life, seemingly scoured clean by the current. But on closer examination however, I could see that there was a fine mat of tiny filter feeder organisms such as anemones, sponges and soft corals. All were noticeably smaller than their counterparts elsewhere in Scottish waters. Larger specimens are perhaps swept away by the current, or perhaps they have just evolved to be smaller to enable them to survive in this unique habitat. Because of the depth, the top of the pinnacle was clear and unobstructed by any kelp forests. Kelp fronds usually peter out at about 15 metres.

Large smooth potholes 4–5 feet across peppered the surface of the pinnacle where small stones had lodged in cracks or crevices and were then remorselessly ground round and round by the currents. Over a long period of time these small stones had carved out 6-foot deep potholes.

There seemed to be no fish life noticeable, perhaps because there was no prey or food worthy of eating here. A few small crabs went about their business here and there.

Dave and I circumnavigated the pinnacle at a depth of about 45 metres and then headed up as planned to its top plateau. We were conscious of trying to avoid spending too long at depth, as that would rack up lengthy decompression stops for the ascent. We kept a careful eye on our dive computers as the minutes ticked away.

In glorious 25-metre visibility all three pairs of divers gradually collected on the top of the pinnacle. It was an odd feeling to see all six of us there and I imagined how it must have looked if you could somehow have stripped away the water. Six tiny specks of humanity, standing on the 100 feet wide table top, of a 200-metre high pinnacle.

As we collected on the plateau, I noticed a perceptible change in the direction of the current – it felt as if someone had thrown a big switch. One minute the tide was dropping off gently in the one direction. The next minute you could feel it starting to pick up rapidly in the other direction. There are titanic forces at work here.

I looked down at the rock I was resting on and sure enough, as if on cue, the one or two small crabs around my feet just made their way into little crevices, braced out their claws and seemingly disappeared. In fact, all life seemed to disappear from the pinnacle simultaneously. The all too brief moment of calm had passed and the residents of the pinnacle were preparing themselves for the next six hours in the maelstrom. If the locals were getting worried, I thought, our team of six divers should be getting out of there.

Dave and I however couldn't resist the temptation to fin over to the edge of the pinnacle and look over the side, down into the 200-metre deep abyss. Of course, in the limited visibility we could only see about 25 metres down the side – deeper than that was just an ominous uniform black. The bottom was well out of sight.

As we held onto rocks and peered over the side of the pinnacle I became aware that my exhaled bubbles had stopped rising upwards – as they had done throughout the whole of my diving career. For a second or two, some bubbles were held motionless in front of my face. With my next exhaled breath the bubbles started to slowly sink downwards over the side of the pinnacle. As I continued to breathe out my bubbles started going downward more and more vigorously. It was a very surreal experience and it was certainly time to get out of this dangerous place.

I looked at Dave and gave the thumbs up hand signal – which was returned with an 'OK' signal from Dave. We prepared ourselves by pumping gas into our suits and wings until we were almost positively buoyant. We then each inflated our deco bags; the reels spun and chattered, paying out their thin line as the bags sped to the surface.

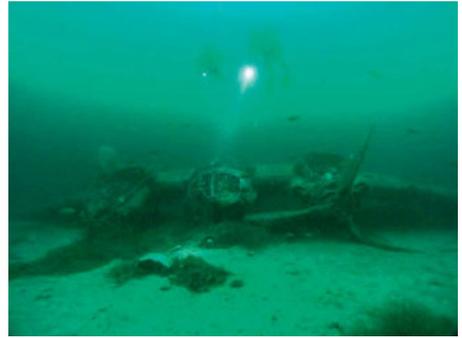
Once the bags hit the surface and the reels stopped paying out, it was time to go. Pumping even more gas into suit and wings we let go of our rocky handholds, stood up and basically let the current get hold of us. We were swept instantly off the pinnacle and out over the chasm of the Gulf of Corryvreckan. Our exhaust bubbles were still going downwards.

We had been warned that the first 10 metres of the ascent would be difficult, and right enough, as I stepped off the top of the pinnacle it was as though a thousand invisible hands were clutching at my legs and trying to pull me down. It was quite an unsettling feeling and initially I had to fin hard to make any headway upwards. The task of managing the ascent however soon absorbed me as I kicked my legs and simultaneously wound in the slack on my reel, essentially winching myself up towards the surface.

Once I got 10 metres up from the top of the pinnacle, the current had already carried us so far downstream and away from the pinnacle that we were starting to come out of the whirlpool. As I rose higher and got further away, the water seemed to settle down – and soon we were just into a regular free hanging ascent on our deco bags and reels. We drifted free in the current, seemingly motionless but in reality speeding over the seabed at several knots in a fixed column of water.

As we all broke the surface and clambered back into the safety of the *Porpoise* a sense of euphoria overwhelmed us. There was much manly banter and slapping of backs – a complete contrast to the silent gallows mood that had overcome the team before the dive. We had successfully carried out perhaps the most challenging dive in British waters, into one of the last great, unexplored habitats on earth. We all realised that it had all gone so smoothly largely due to the professionalism and know-how of David Ainsley and team leader Graeme Bruce. They had made a potentially terrifying dive manageable.

We had stood on the pinnacle and peered into the abyss.



Above: Heinkel 111 in northern Norwegian waters © Gordon Wadsworth

Left: Sherman tank deck cargo on the SS Empire Heritage, North Channel, Irish Sea © Grainne Patton tanks

Below: Sherman tank deck cargo, SS Empire Heritage, North Channel, Irish Sea © Grainne Patton

