

**A Heavy Metal Trio in the Upper Keys – -
Diving Three Popular Wrecks in Key Largo and Islamorada
-Jeffrey Galler-**

Best known for its abundant fish life and healthy coral reefs, the northern, upper Keys in Florida also feature a large number of shipwrecks for divers to explore.

Three of the most popular, the Benwood, the Eagle, and the United States Coast Guard Cutter Duane, have been dubbed “The Heavy Metal Tour,” by Joe and Bobbye Dowda, husband and wife owners of Horizon Divers.

You may choose to go on Horizon Divers’ 5-1/2 hour, three-tank, trip to all three wrecks. Or, you may choose to explore them on three different days, enjoying a combination wreck dive and reef dive as part of a two-tank dive each day.

Whichever way you do it, each wreck is a special adventure, each with its own unique history and attractions. This heavy metal trio provides for a series of wonderful dive experiences.

A Night Dive on the Benwood

April 9, 1942 was a dark and moonless night, and the United States was at war with Nazi Germany. German U-boats preyed mercilessly on American coastal shipping, and, to avoid detection, American cargo ships often traveled at night completely blacked out.

On that fateful night, the Benwood, built in England and registered as a merchant marine freighter by Norwegian owners, was carrying a cargo of phosphate rock from Tampa, Florida, to Norfolk, Virginia. In pitch darkness, the bow of the Benwood collided with the port side of the Robert C. Tuttle, another blacked-out ship that was headed for Altreco, Texas.

With a big gash in the Benwood's hull, the Captain ordered his crew to abandon ship, and transfer to the Tuttle. The Benwood captain and first mate remained aboard, and with the ship rapidly taking on water, and with part of its phosphate cargo on fire, the two of them managed to steer toward shore so that the ship could

sink in more shallow water, where the cargo could be more easily salvaged.

In a remarkable feat of seamanship, they succeeded in bringing the crippled Benwood from eight miles offshore to its present location in 25 to 45 feet of water. Unsubstantiated legend has it, that the flaming ship attracted the attention of a German submarine, who added to the Benwood's woes by firing a torpedo into the ship.

Because of the Benwood Captain's heroic actions that night, allowing him to save a good deal of the ship's cargo without any of his crew being injured, this episode is taught in U.S. Naval Academies as a lesson in how a ship's captain reacts in a crisis.

For the remainder of WWII, the wreck was used by U.S. Naval pilots for target practice. After the war, the Benwood became a navigational hazard and was dynamited by engineers.

Consequently, the wreckage is scattered over a wide area, five miles offshore on a sloped bottom, with the bow resting in 45 feet of water and the stern section in 25 feet.

A Fantastic Night Dive

By day, the Benwood is a great dive on an historic wreck that is a magnet for abundant sea life. After dusk, a Benwood night dive is a magical, phantasmagoric experience.

In his pre-dive briefing, Horizon Divers owner Joe Dowda provided us with very thorough and educational information about our upcoming dive. He explained that a shipwreck like the Benwood, with its tangled metal, overhead environments, and scattered debris fields, provides fish with many ecological niches and habitats in which to take up residence. Because this wreck has so many spaces, both large and small, it has provided for a fish population much greater in quantities, in sizes, and in varieties than most natural reefs.

He explained that a night dive is an especially fascinating experience, because fish that normally sleep by day, come out at night. Also, with heightened senses and sharpened focus, divers

can study small things that they are apt to miss in the daytime, and experience an almost spiritual feeling.

Joe also related that he prefers not to do a night dive on the Benwood on weekends, because so many dive operators dump so many divers with their night lights into the water, that it's almost like daylight down there. He prefers a night dive on the Benwood on a weeknight, when a few divers can have the wreck pretty much to themselves.

At dusk, expert dive guides, Tom McCamey and Moe Jones, led us down a shallow mooring line, where we descended 25 feet, to the stern section of the ship. Tom was our expert navigator, while Moe was our expert fish spotter: whenever she spied a particularly interesting sight, she signaled us with her dive light.

We gathered on the sea floor, and there, as described to us on the surface, we found a small city in transition: day-time fish, like parrotfish and wrasse, scurried about, racing to their nighttime hiding places, before the night predators were fully awake and hunting for prey. Some frantically grazed along the ship's

encrustation of algae, barnacles, seaweed and coral for one, last, pre-bedtime snack. At the same time, nocturnal fish were emerging from their homes, still half-sleepy, preparing for their night activities.

Swimming down the port side of the wreck, we saw many scattered piles of debris. Most of the ship was covered in layers of soft and hard coral. We came across large sections of metal pieces, stacked on top of each other, providing many nooks and crannies for fish to hide.

In many areas the ship's inner hull sections were exposed, and they looked like a series of honeycombs. In this latticework of metal bracing, we found what Tom and Moe have nicknamed "The Parrotfish Condominium."

In each small "condo" niche one or two parrotfish were sleeping comfortably. It was here that one of the immediate and obvious advantages of a night dive became apparent: during the day, these fish are constantly in motion, making it difficult to study them or get a good photograph. Now, we were able to study each

motionless fish and identify stoplight parrotfish, queen parrotfish, blue parrotfish, midnight parrotfish, and rainbow parrotfish, in all sizes and colors.

One particular rainbow parrotfish, sleeping in a large space between two collapsed deck plates, was huge: at least four feet in length.

Of particular interest was the mucous membrane in which many of the parrotfish had enveloped themselves. Because these fish are especially tasty to night predators like moray eels, they protect themselves by secreting a mucous material from their mouths that surrounds them like a bubble. This material hides their scent. This is of particular importance, since nocturnal eaters, because of the lack of light, hunt mostly by smell.

Have you ever gone on a reef dive early in the morning and seen little mucous balls stuck on the reef? These remainders of the previous night's protective membranes dissolve in the water and are added to the reef's nutrient broth.

As we swam toward the bow of the ship, it seemed that thousands of tiny, red eyes were staring at us every time we passed a large wall of encrusted metal. After the dive, Tom explained that these were finger-sized rock shrimp, which come out to feed by night.

The sea bottom was hard, consisting of rock, sand, and sea grass. We were able to see lobsters, eyes glistening from our flashlights, walking leisurely along the bottom, toward the grass beds where they feed. One large spider crab and several stone crabs also made their appearance. Because these crustaceans all feed at night, they are much more readily seen out in the open at night than in the daytime.

As we swam around the relatively intact bow section of the wreck and swung around to the starboard side, we came across a large undercut, where the wreckage has formed a cave-like area. We were delighted, and somewhat apprehensive to discover a very large moray eel emerging from his daytime residence, supposedly hungry and ready for some nighttime hunting.

Although divers do sometimes tend to exaggerate, this eel was eight feet long, with a tremendous girth of ten inches wide and twelve inches high. When he emerged from his lair and started swimming right toward us, he actually looked much larger. Tom assured us (after the dive, thanks!) that this eel is actually very friendly, harmless to divers, and much sought after when diving the Benwood. He also explained that while spotted moray eels usually hug the bottom, and go in and out of holes looking for a meal, green moray eels swim more freely out in the open.

At this point we ascended and came over the side of the wreck to the inside area. Looking down into the rusted out section of the wreck, we were able to appreciate how much twisted and tangled wreckage was visible, and watched several damselfish, way past their bedtime, feeding along the encrusted metal.

Continuing on the starboard side of the wreck, we stopped moving for a while, and found that many more items of interest were becoming visible. We saw large areas of green phosphorescence, produced by bioluminescent worms and animals

that live on the bottom. At one point, sitting silently with subdued lighting and gently waving our hands in the water, we were able to produce a Walt Disney-like trail of green sparks, produced by these bioluminescent organisms.

Looking up, we saw that dozens of moon jellyfish floated above us. We were delighted to see a turtle come out of nowhere and swim by. Joe had alerted us that because a deep drop-off was nearby, large, pelagic fish like spotted eagle rays, often cruise over the wreck at night, and that turtles often come to feed on the jellyfish.

Although we didn't see our turtle eating any of the floating jellyfish before he swam away, I silently prayed that he had gone off to bring back all his friends for a jellyfish banquet. I hoped that on exiting the water later I would not have to negotiate my way past their stinging tentacles.

Turning our attention back to the wreck, we saw small, six-inch squid hovering in the water. We remembered Joe's warning that many night fish are very photosensitive, and kept our light

from shining directly on several puffers that slowly lumbered their way around us.

On our pre-dive briefing, we were urged to remember that on a night dive, “the less you move, the more you see.” Continuing to hover silently, we soon saw a large group of barracuda floating above us, motionless in the water.

Looking down once again, we were able to see several large-eyed squirrel fish swimming about. Once again, their large eye size made us acutely aware of how sensitive they must be to bright light, and tried to avoid shining our lights directly at them.

After 45 minutes, with several divers down to less than 1000 psi in their tanks, we reluctantly ascended, carefully avoiding the moon jellyfish, and ended the dive.

The fantastic nature of the night dive on the Benwood lingered with me for quite a while. On the 25-minute ride back to the dive shop, the magic continued as we sipped hot chocolate and were treated to a magnificent display of infinite numbers of stars above us.

Going to the Keys? Make a night dive on the Benwood a
high priority!

The Eagle

The Eagle has special significance in the Florida Keys, because it was the first major wreck of its kind that was intentionally sunk.

Originally called the Aron K., the freighter had been used to carry scrap newspaper from Miami to South America, where it was turned into cardboard and brought back to Miami. Stories abound about Miami gangster associations and underworld activities, but this colorful background may be somewhat embellished, and it is often difficult to separate fact from fiction.

When, in early 1985, a fire made the ship a total loss, Captain Ken Wright of Lady Cyana Divers saw the situation as a perfect opportunity to create a large, artificial reef off Islamorada.

The Florida Keys Artificial Reef Association was able to raise \$50,000. to purchase the ship, tow it, clean it of all wooden parts and residual oil and fuel, and, with the help of the Miami Bomb Squad, blow it up and sink it.

Because a large amount of money was donated by the Eagle Tire Company, the ship was renamed the Eagle.

The 287-foot ship landed in 110 feet of water, on its starboard side with her bow pointed toward shore, and soon became a haven for many types of marine life.

In September of 1998, Hurricane Georges split the wreck into two sections: a large bow section and a smaller stern section. Always an interesting dive, the new, remodeled wreck is even more interesting to explore now.

Exploring the Eagle has become the signature dive of the Lady Cyana Divers, in Islamorada. The Eagle is a great dive because of its place in Florida Keys' history, because of its interesting and intact structures that divers can explore, and because of the abundant marine life that it has attracted and nurtured.

Diving the Eagle

“This will be the best pre-dive briefing you’ve ever heard,” promised Gloria Teague, owner/manager of Lady Cyana Divers, “but, I warn you, Paul is anything but brief!”

She was correct on both counts. Just as diving the Eagle has become synonymous with Lady Cyana Divers, getting “briefed” before the dive has become closely associated with dive guide, Paul McDonald.

Almost as interesting as the shipwreck itself, Paul, a retired science teacher, provided us with a most thorough and colorful commentary about our upcoming dive.

During the 30 minute ride out to the wreck, he explained that in many ways, diving the Eagle was simpler and safer than diving on a reef.

“First,” he advised, “it’s hard to get dislocated because the dive boat is fastened to the wreck itself, via the mooring lines.”

He went on to explain that a second safe feature is that there is absolutely nothing around the wreck to lure divers away, and therefore, it is extremely unlikely for anyone to get lost.

Third, on this wreck, he continued, divers needn't worry about becoming entrapped, or claustrophobic, and confused by silt, because of the way the wreck lies on the bottom.

“The way the ship is lying on its starboard side, and the way the current, if there is any, washes it, any area that divers are allowed to go, is absolutely clear, safe and apprehension-free,” he counseled.

He advised against swimming through the bowels of the ship, because there is “absolutely nothing there but water, fish that are visible from the doorways, dusty and dirty stuff, and absolutely no artifacts of interest.”

He suggested that we don gloves for the dive, so as not to scrape our hands as we descend hand-over-hand down the mooring line. In addition, wearing gloves is very helpful to divers as they propel themselves along the wreck or grasp the ship's many

window frames and doorframes while peering inside, for a “visual penetration” of the wreck.

Because much of the ship is encrusted with invertebrate life, many of which are nematocyst-yielding organisms, wearing gloves would protect us from stings, and from sharp edges of rusted metal.

With four mooring lines to choose from, we were advised to descend on the one that begins below the surface, and descends to the wheelhouse on the stern section of the ship. This strategy placed us very close to the center of the most interesting ship structures and fish life. We were also advised to keep our maximum depth to 92 feet, which would give us a maximum bottom time of 20 minutes.

As we descended the mooring line, we appreciated the wisdom of receiving such a thorough pre-dive briefing. With the descent taking about two minutes, we only had 18 minutes in which to explore and enjoy this unique dive.

We followed our dive plan carefully. When we touched down on the wheelhouse, on the port side of the Eagle hull, we were at 74 feet. We found ourselves at the main deck level, and conditions were excellent, with almost no current and 60 foot visibility.

Because the wreck was lying completely on its right side, we dropped down over the side of the wreck, and descended midway down the vertical wall of what was once the horizontal deck. We leveled off at a point midway down to the sand, placing us at 90 feet, and even with the keel.

As we faced the open part of the wreck, we turned to our left, and saw the wheelhouse, completely exposed to us. The wheelhouse was three decks high, coming off the main deck. We swam over and were delighted to find that in our lights' illumination, red and scarlet colors suddenly came to life on the invertebrates that had encrusted the ship. At that depth, those bright colors are filtered out, and are not visible in the ambient light.

We peered through the windows of the wheelhouse, following Paul's admonition to only do "visual penetrations" there, and tried to visualize the activity that would be taking place there, were the ship still alive.

A large doorway at 86 feet, provided a perfect frame for photographic opportunities.

Moving around to the smokestack area, toward the stern, we saw a large crow's nest directly on top of the wheelhouse, even with the smokestack. Hovering over the crow's nest, we were able to get a panoramic view of the approximately 100-foot-long stern section.

Continuing at a casual rate toward the stern, propeller end, there were many doors and windows that we looked through. The propeller, which had been completely visible before Hurricane George's 80 mile-per-hour winds, was now almost completely covered by sand.

A large blast hole, one of the eight used to sink the Eagle, was clearly visible there. Shining our lights into the hole, we were

able to see into the dark recesses of the engine room and some of its compartments.

Ascending over the curve of the hull, we were able to count 14 portholes in a row, just shy of getting to the main deck. At the main deck level, we were able to look through large windows, allowing us to see the upper cabins and the main companionway. Replacing the prior, human occupants, were numerous Bermuda chubs, jacks, and permit.

Working our way forward, we now came back to our mooring line that marked our descent from the dive boat. Eleven minutes had passed from the time we entered the water, and we all had sufficient air to continue our dive.

We swam forward, over the 20-foot gap that now separated the two sections of the wreck. On observing the twisted, peeled back, sharp sections of hull, produced by Hurricane Georges, we all felt an increased appreciation for the incredibly powerful force of nature.

Turning 120 degrees left and down, we came into the larger, bow section of the wreck. Where the split occurred, we swam right into the remains of a cargo hold. Swimming forward through this cargo hold, we came to a large doorway, lying on its side of course, with a ghostly light coming from the forward cargo hold on the other side of the door.

Taking time to pause at the door, we looked down into a large, 70-foot-long by 35-foot-high open area. It looked like a large gymnasium, with an open wall on the right side, where the main deck opening was unobstructed. The hull had two giant blast holes that allowed the ambient light to come in.

We observed the abundant fish life present. We were able to identify giant schools of yellowtail, snappers, and several species of grunts that had made the cargo holds their personal aquariums. Tiny gobis were everywhere.

In these cargo holds and around the deck areas of the Eagle, we succeeded in seeing four of the five species of angelfish that

our briefing had told us to watch out for. We saw blue angelfish, queen angelfish, French angelfish, and one pair of gray angelfish who traveled together all over the wreck. We were not able to see any Atlantic spadefish, though.

At this point, 16 minutes into the dive, and with one of our divers down to 1200 psi, we exited the forward cargo hold through the deck opening, and swam briefly along the mast line. There are two masts pointing straight out, horizontally, from the deck. Although we searched for the well-camouflaged giant sea clams that we were told were present there, we could not detect them.

Here, we were absolutely thrilled to spot one of the two large jewfish that are famous residents of the Eagle. At six-feet in length and over 300 pounds, it was quite a sight. Its smaller, 225 pound, companion chose not to show himself to us, no doubt patrolling the innards of the ship, searching for a baitfish lunch.

As we swam back toward the break between the two sections, we were able to see the entire length of the deck of the bow portion of the ship. We glided over the gap, and gradually began to ascend

the stern section to the wheelhouse level, where we found our mooring line, waiting for us patiently. At the 15-foot level, we made a three-minute safety stop.

On the boat trip back to the dive shop, we thanked Paul for his detailed and excellent pre-dive briefing. On a deep wreck dive, where every allowable minute of bottom time is so precious, we realized how important it is to not waste any time floundering about, trying to get oriented, and deciding where to go next. When you want every minute of limited bottom time to be meaningful, there is no substitute for an organized, detailed, pre-dive explanation and plan.

Over the sound of the boat's engine, Paul regaled us with the story of the time he was on the Eagle wreck, repairing a mooring line, when a large, hovering, 25-foot whale shark suddenly cast a large shadow over him, and followed him throughout his dive. He described the whale shark as being dark gray on top with large white spots, and a cream-colored belly.

“The whale shark was surrounded by escort fish who weighed in the neighborhood of fifty pounds,” he reminisced, “he stayed with us for the whole dive. He came down to the sand. He swam over us. It was just an awesome sight, a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence.”

Now, I’ll have to go back for another Lady Cyana dive on the Eagle, and find out if this “tale” is longer than that of the described whale shark.

The Duane

Certainly the most famous of the three shipwrecks in the “Heavy Metal Trio,” the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Duane has a long and distinguished record of service.

The 327-foot Cutter, built in 1936, served with the U.S. Atlantic Fleet during World War II. On April 17, 1943, she and her sister ship, the Spencer, sank the German U-boat U-77. The Duane was General John O'Daniel's flagship during the allied invasion of France.

During the War in Vietnam, the Duane patrolled the coast of Vietnam as part of the Coastal Surveillance Force.

Today, the ship is best remembered for its vital role in four major rescues at sea, picking up a total of 346 survivors. In 1980, the Duane was an escort vessel for thousands of Cuban refugees fleeing to the United States, during the Mariel boatlift.

In August 1985, she was decommissioned, as the oldest active U.S. military vessel, and donated to the Keys Association of Dive Operators for use as an artificial reef. The Duane was

intentionally sunk on November 27, 1987, one mile south of famous Molasses Reef, where it lies perfectly upright on a sandy bottom in 120-feet of water.

Because this is a deep dive, and because of the possibility of very strong, and very sudden currents over the wreck, only experienced divers should attempt to explore the Duane. Wesley and Robert, owners of "It's a Dive," dive center, sometimes are forced to cancel scheduled trips to the ship, because wind conditions, 6 to 8-foot waves, and "screaming currents" of 2 to 2-1/2 knots flowing from stern to bow over the wreck make it unsuitable for diving.

Diving the Duane

“Well, was it worth it?” demanded my wife, when I returned from diving on the Duane.

My wife knew that I was obsessed with successfully diving the Duane on this trip, and that two previous attempts to do so were thwarted by poor weather conditions.

“Yes!” was my resounding and triumphant response.

The dive was so enjoyable and successful, because the water was calm and clear with a negligible current, because the ship is so interesting to explore, and because of the clever dive plan outlined by our captain, Bruce, and our dive guide, Ryan.

Instead of descending down the mooring line at the stern of the ship, exploring forward against the current, and then doubling back and following the current back to the stern to ascend the same line, they had a much better plan.

We were to descend the mooring line at the bow of the ship, and, while following the current toward the stern and exploring the

wreck at a leisurely pace, the dive boat would move to the mooring line buoy at the stern of the ship, awaiting our ascent.

This ingenious plan allowed us to make the best use of our very limited bottom time. By keeping our maximum depth at 100-feet, we would have a bottom time of 20-minutes.

During the 45-minute ride to the wreck, the crew was able to entertain us with stories of their diving experiences on the Duane. Ryan told us of the time he found a half-hooked, dead snapper on the deck. Hoping to see a barracuda feed, he tossed it up above his head.

“Suddenly,” he related, “two, very large bull sharks appeared out of nowhere, one of them snapped up the fish, and sped away.”

I turned to Aaron, a fellow diver sitting next to me, and asked nervously, “Does this make you worry? I’ve seen many nurse sharks, reef sharks, and even a hammerhead shark, but bull sharks! They’re supposed to be vicious!”

“Don’t worry,” he replied soothingly, “if you’re apprehensive about sharks, just stick with me. Sharks would never start up with me. I’m a law student. Professional courtesy.”

Somewhat mollified, I listened to Wesley describe the time he witnessed a massive school of southern rays cruise right over the ship, at the level of the crow’s nest.

Bruce described the large moray eel that he had once found slithering along the deck, the turtles that turn up from time to time, the large jewfish that lives in one of the cabins, and the nurse sharks that sometimes cuddle up to the side of the ship on the sandy bottom.

When we arrived at the dive site, we quickly descended the bow mooring line. On the way down, we enjoyed the beautiful, crystal-clear, deep blue water around us, and were surrounded by yellow tail snappers.

With 60-foot visibility, the ship’s main deck was clearly visible 40 feet down the mooring line. When I reached the main deck at the bow end of the ship, several divers that had preceded

me were peering over the railing and pointing excitedly. The tail end of a large, green, nurse shark was clearly visible, his head hiding in a sandy undercut at the bow's hull. I didn't descend the 30 feet to the sandy floor to see the shark close up, because I didn't want to change my dive profile by going below 100 feet.

Nurse sharks, like ostriches, apparently believe that if their heads are hidden, "they can't see you, you can't see them."

Turning our attention back to the ship's deck, we began to drift in the gentle, ½ knot current, toward the stern of the ship. Not far from the bow, we came across a dark, round, 4-foot diameter hole in the deck, where a large gun had once been mounted. One of the divers stuck his head into the hole to get a better look, and was startled to see a very territorial barracuda emerge. After the dive, we all felt that the barracuda had been approximately two feet long, but he insisted that it must have been at least six feet in length.

We continued our drift, and noticed that, after being submerged for 14 years, most of the Duane's metal was encrusted by algae, hard coral, and sea plumes.

We swam through an open door on the starboard side of the wheelhouse, and came out on the port side. We ascended slightly, and this time entered an open door on the navigation bridge from the port side and exited on the starboard side. I tried to imagine the frenzy of activity that must have been taking place here, while the crew tracked and sank the German U-boat U-77.

After exiting the bridge, we saw the lifeboat davits below us, and continued toward the stern of the ship. We almost entered a large, open, inviting cabin on the main deck, but rapidly changed our minds when we realized that the cabin was currently occupied by a rather large, multi-toothed barracuda. We didn't want the creature to feel that we had any intentions of evicting him.

Swimming toward the radar mast, we looked through open windows and saw Nassau groupers, and queen angelfish. Angelfish and dinner-plate sized, silvery permit were all around us.

We ascended the radar mast and stopped at the crow's nest at 75 feet. From there, we enjoyed a panoramic view of the entire wreck below us. We were enveloped in a very large school of hundreds of blue-striped grunts.

Descending back down to the main deck, we followed several blue tangs past the radar room toward the stern. With almost all our bottom time expended, we had to cancel our plan to visit not only the bathrooms located at the stern of the ship, but also the Duane's prominent propeller. We ascended the stern mooring line toward the mooring buoy and our patiently waiting dive boat above.

In a perverse sort of way, I wasn't too disappointed in not have seen everything I had hoped to see on this dive. Now, I have an excuse to revisit the wreck of the Duane.

Sidebar #1

Horizon Divers – Key Largo

Sparkling clean, spanking new, and meticulously organized, Horizon Divers has the look, feel, and smell of a brand-new, luxury automobile.

Husband and wife owners, Joe and Bobbye Dowda, have assembled a very knowledgeable, professional, and ultra-courteous team. Their boat, the “Cheeca View,” is an ultra-comfortable, fast and stable 45’ Corinthian Catamaran. With twin outboard gasoline motors there are no annoying fumes; and, with individual passenger comfort in mind, they pledge to never load the boat with more than half of the boat’s approved capacity.

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