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PERFECTLY FRAMED
MAJESTIC FISH ON CANVAS

COLD WATER DIVING
LAND OF FIRE AND ICE

CHARITY & CONSERVATION
IN THE HEART OF CHICAGO

FINAL JOURNEY OF THE BAHADA
DISCOVER A GILKEY TUG

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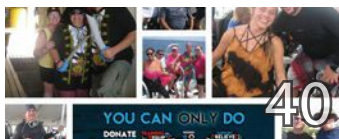
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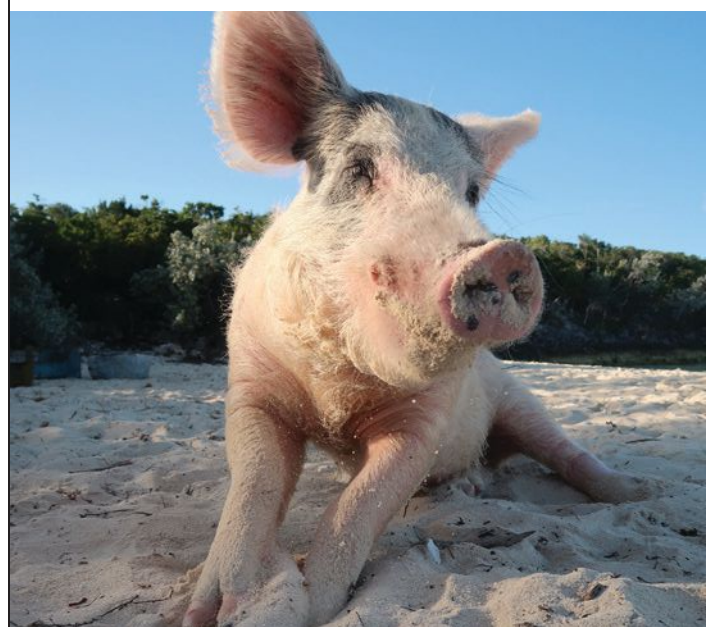
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We encourage readers to participate in determining the content of this publication by giving us their opinions on the types of articles they would like to see. We invite letters to the editor, manuscripts and photographs related to diving or dive-related business. Send us your stories and photos!



The nameplate from the USS Oriskany is on display at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola

Diving the Great Carrier Reef

Article and Photos by Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

We dug our toes into the powdery sugar-white sand of Pensacola Beach and gazed out over the languid waters of the Gulf of Mexico until our eyes met with the horizon. Suddenly, in front of us the calm waters began to boil and before long baitfish were leaping out of the water, seeking escape from the dolphins that were hunting them in the inshore sand bars. Further in the distance, several Cownose Rays were similarly leaping from the water while pelicans swopped in over the baitfish looking for an easy meal. This spectacle of life would normally be captivating, but our minds were on something further out, something deeper,

something even more impressive...

On May 17, 2006, the USS Oriskany, an Essex-class aircraft carrier built for the Navy in 1945 and first commissioned in 1950, was intentionally laid to rest on the sandy bottom of the Gulf of Mexico in 220 feet of water 25 nautical miles south of Pensacola. At the time of her sinking, she was the largest object ever intentionally sunk in the entire world and our hearts were beating a bit faster in anticipation of our dive the next day.

The Oriskany, otherwise known as The Mighty "O", was actually named after the Battle of Oriskany in the Revolutionary War. She served in

the Pacific during the Korean War, earning two battle stars and the Vietnam War, where she earned 10 additional battle stars. It was from the deck of the Oriskany that Lieutenant Commander John McCain took off in an A-4 Skyhawk on October 26, 1967 on his 23rd bombing mission of the Vietnam War. McCain was shot down, captured and remained a prisoner of war until January 1973.

After 25 years of service, the ship was decommissioned on September 30, 1976. Originally laid up in Bremerton, Washington, the Oriskany was subsequently moved to Vallejo, California and then on to Beaumont, Texas before ownership

was transferred to the state of Florida as part of its Artificial Reef program. The ship was then towed to Corpus Christie, Texas where environmental preparation was completed prior to the planned sinking. Originally set for June 2005, the sinking had to be postponed due to delays arising from concerns over materials still left on board. She was then towed back to Corpus Christie to ride out the 2005 hurricane season.

It would be a year later when 500-lb C-4 explosives strategically placed throughout the ship were detonated and the Mighty "O" sank stern first in 37 minutes, creating an instant attraction for divers in Pensacola and the world over.

The Oriskany sits upright on the

bottom in 220 feet of water. The flight deck is at 150 feet, but recreational divers can reach the top of the control tower in about 80 feet of water.

We booked our trip to the Oriskany through the Scuba Shack in Pensacola, and Wet Dream Charters. Our speedy six-pack left the dock the next morning and headed out into the calm Gulf waters under a brilliant sun and with a warm breeze. In a little over an hour, we had tied up and it was time to backroll into the 78-degree water and begin our descent to the sunken aircraft carrier below. Hand over hand we pulled ourselves down the descent line. The top of the Oriskany's tower became visible fairly soon in water with 50-foot visibility. Moments later we were on the wreck and looking at tattered

POW-MIA and American Flags placed on the wreck and now billowing in the slight current. Large Barracuda eyed us warily, along with several Amberjack that seemed to like hovering near the top of the wreck.

We quickly descended to 130 feet and made our way down an outside walkway until we gained entrance to the tower through a large hatch opening. Once inside, we looked for the staircase which would be our navigation marker to the upper levels of the tower and an exit back into open water.

Schools of baitfish swarmed around the outside of the tower. Indeed, the Oriskany's new purpose as an artificial reef seems to have been achieved: plenty of fish and



The USS Oriskany's superstructure beckons divers to explore

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a wide variety of species seemed evident as we explored this one section of the massive wreck. Tech divers who venture down to the flight deck and below report numerous sightings of Lionfish in the deeper sections and efforts are routinely made to spear these and remove them from the wreck.

We finished our dive where we began but prior to beginning our ascent we commiserated with the Barracuda while taking notice of a trio of dangerous Bristle Worms crawling along the upper section of the Oriskany. Life certainly is abounding on the wreck.

Between dives we enjoyed a

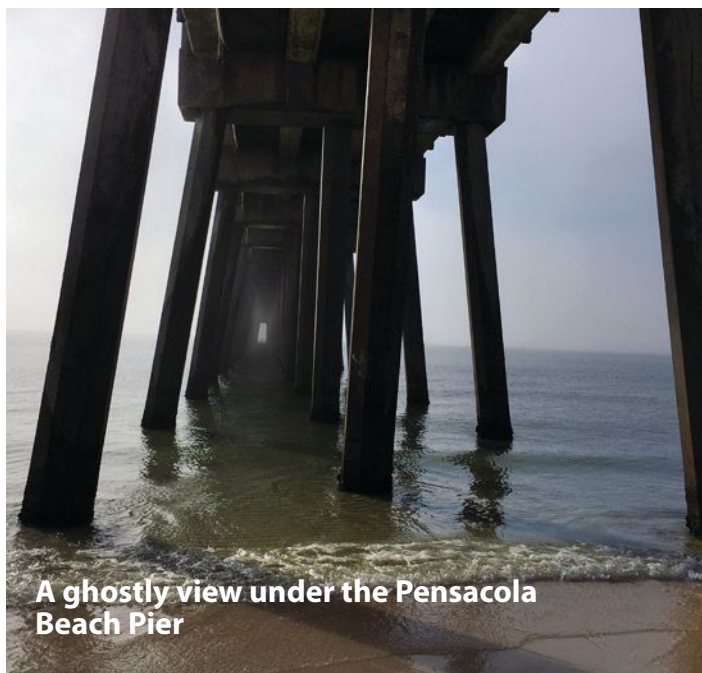
sandwich, the late summer sun and the calm seas all the while excitedly talking about our experience on the Mighty "O". It was then that we suddenly heard the scream of jet engines. Pensacola is home to a Navy Air Base, and is the base of operations of the famed Blue Angel squadron. The sounds of fighter planes are common and people can frequently be seen peering into the sky to get a glimpse of the pilots in training taking their fighter jets through their paces. We looked up just in time to see a pair of fighter jets scream by only a few feet off the water's surface and off the port side of the dive boat.

In a fraction of a second, they were gone. But the connection between

those fighter jets and the sunken aircraft carrier below the waves was not lost on us. The Mighty "O", a ship from which fighter pilots from decades ago would have taken off in those very same type of jets, now rests quietly in the Gulf of Mexico, still on duty, still a testament to the sacrifice and service that so many have given in defense of this nation. The USS Oriskany is no longer an active aircraft carrier. She has become, as some have referred to her, the Great Carrier Reef. We felt honored to have paid her a visit.



Divers can reach the top of the control tower in about 80 feet of water



A ghostly view under the Pensacola Beach Pier



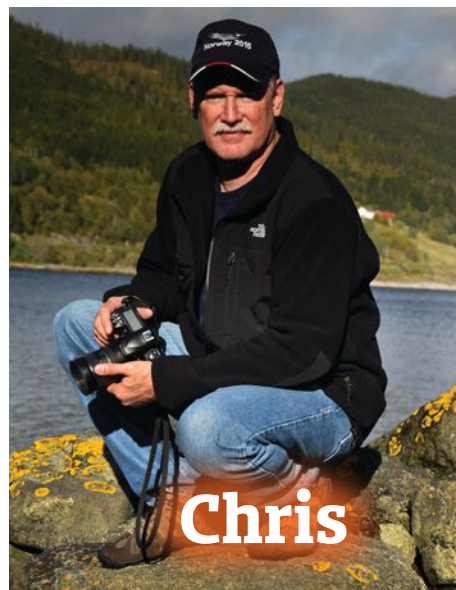
A diver explores the wreck of the USS Oriskany

About Eco-Photo Explorers: Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

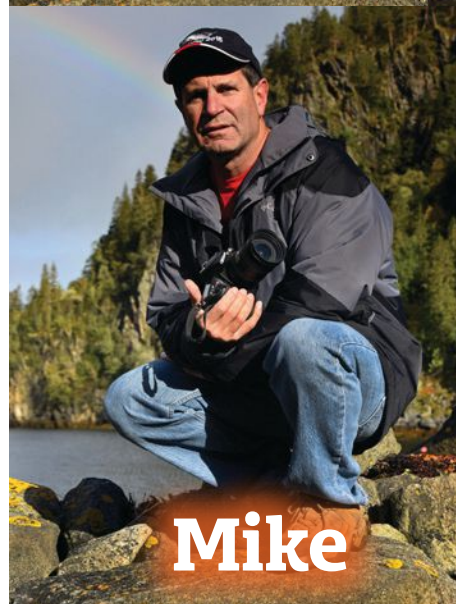
Michael Salvarezza and Christopher Weaver have been diving the waters the world since 1978. In that time, they have spent thousands of hours underwater and have accumulated a large and varied library of photographic images. They have presented their work in many multi-media slide presentations, and have appeared previously at Beneath the Sea, the Boston Sea Rovers Underwater Clinic, Ohio ScubaFest and Our World Underwater. Mike and Chris have been published more than 125 articles in numerous magazines, including National Geographic Adventure, and have authored numerous articles for the majority of the dive publications the world over. Their work has also been used to support a number of research and educational programs, including the Jason Project for Education, the Atlantis Marine World Aquarium in New York, The New York Harbor School Billion Oyster Project, The Northeast Ocean Planning Recreation Survey and the Cambridge University and the University of Groningen Arctic Centre work on monitoring the transformation of historic features in Antarctica and Svalbard. Mike and Chris are the Executive Producers of the annual Long Island Divers Association (LIDA) Film Festival.

Eco-Photo Explorers (EPE) is a New York based organization and was formed in 1994 to help promote interest in protecting the environment through knowledge and awareness through the use of underwater photography. Photography, multimedia slide presentations, lectures and freelance writing are all used to accomplish this goal. Christopher Weaver and Michael Salvarezza make up Eco-Photo Explorers. Both live in New York on Long Island and have been scuba diving together since 1978, but didn't seriously start photographing the ocean realm until 1989. Since then, they have spent thousands of hours underwater accumulating and putting together a large and varied library of high-resolution stock photography from around the world. They specialize in all aspects of underwater still photography (wide angle and macro), nature photography, magazine and technical writing and have produced many multimedia slide programs that are designed to educate as well as enlighten the public about the marine environment and the various threats that exist to destroy it.

www.ecophotoexplorers.com



Chris



Mike