

# THE EDMUND FITZGERALD

“Superior they said never gives up her dead when the gales of November come early.”

— Gordon Lightfoot

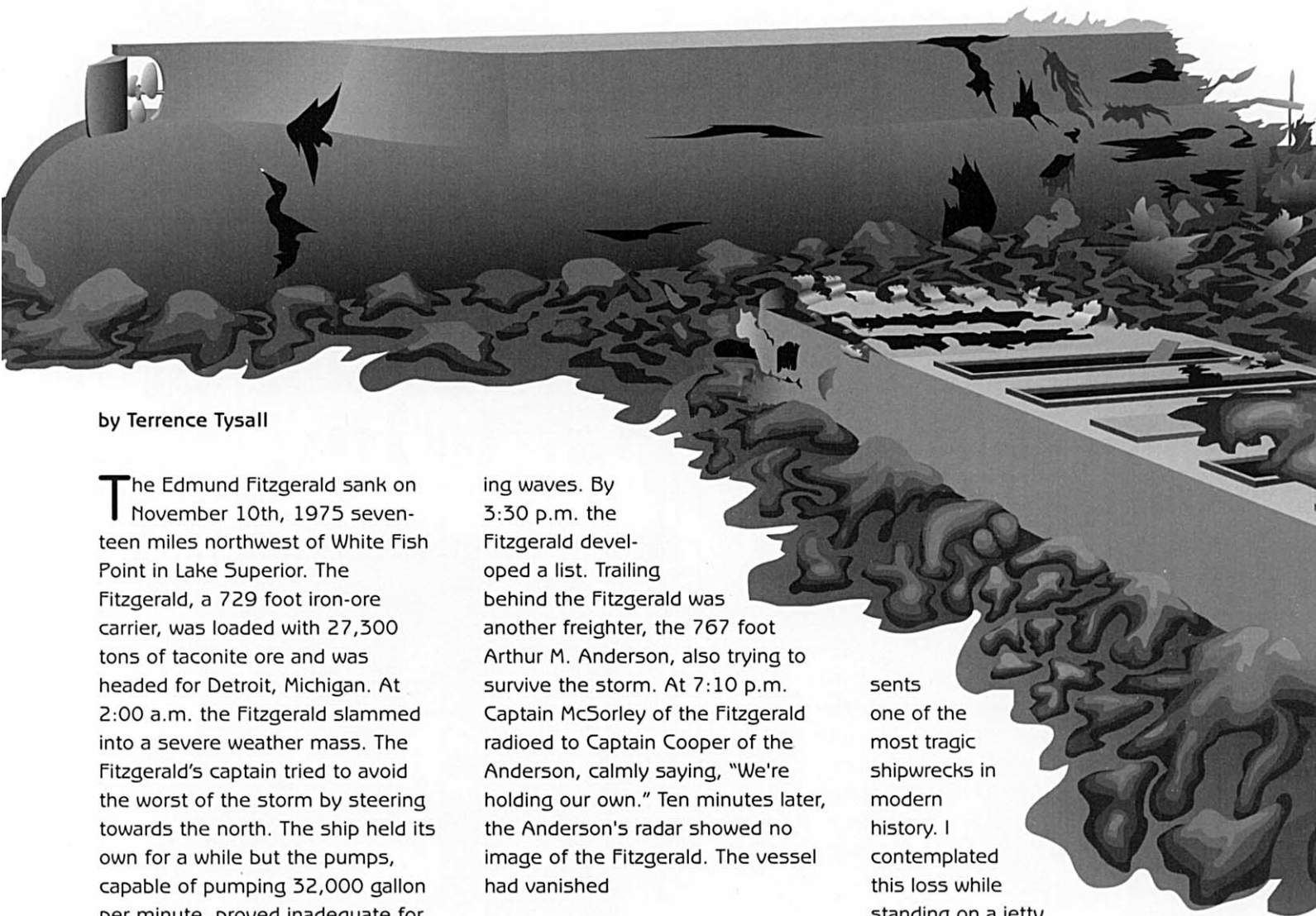
by Terrence Tysall

The Edmund Fitzgerald sank on November 10th, 1975 seventeen miles northwest of White Fish Point in Lake Superior. The Fitzgerald, a 729 foot iron-ore carrier, was loaded with 27,300 tons of taconite ore and was headed for Detroit, Michigan. At 2:00 a.m. the Fitzgerald slammed into a severe weather mass. The Fitzgerald's captain tried to avoid the worst of the storm by steering towards the north. The ship held its own for a while but the pumps, capable of pumping 32,000 gallon per minute, proved inadequate for the tremendous amount of water pouring in from the rain and crash-

ing waves. By 3:30 p.m. the Fitzgerald developed a list. Trailing behind the Fitzgerald was another freighter, the 767 foot Arthur M. Anderson, also trying to survive the storm. At 7:10 p.m. Captain McSorley of the Fitzgerald radioed to Captain Cooper of the Anderson, calmly saying, “We're holding our own.” Ten minutes later, the Anderson's radar showed no image of the Fitzgerald. The vessel had vanished

The loss of the Fitzgerald and the entire crew of twenty nine, repre-

sents one of the most tragic shipwrecks in modern history. I contemplated this loss while standing on a jetty reaching out into Lake Superior. The jetty was shaking from the



impact of the colliding waves. I could hardly believe that this was the same body of water that only hours before had reflected, mirror like, the canopy of stars overhead. There would be no diving today. Once again Gitchegumee, as Lake Superior is known in Indian legend, had taught a human the meaning of the word humility.

How did I, a confirmed warm water lover, find himself standing on the shore of the largest of the great lakes? Two persons were responsible, Gordon Lightfoot, and Mike Zee. Gordon Lightfoot's influence was felt first, when he recorded his number one hit in 1977, *The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald*. As an eleven year old boy, who was

already addicted to water and diving, the song fascinated me with it's tale of the powerful lake and it's hapless victims. I recall listening to the song, picturing in my young mind a mighty ship being torn asunder by a vicious gale, and the fate of the twenty-nine crewmen.


Mike Zee's influence was first felt when I met him three years ago. I was struck by his extreme focus, and drive towards an unspoken goal. Little did I realize the goal he had in mind at that time.

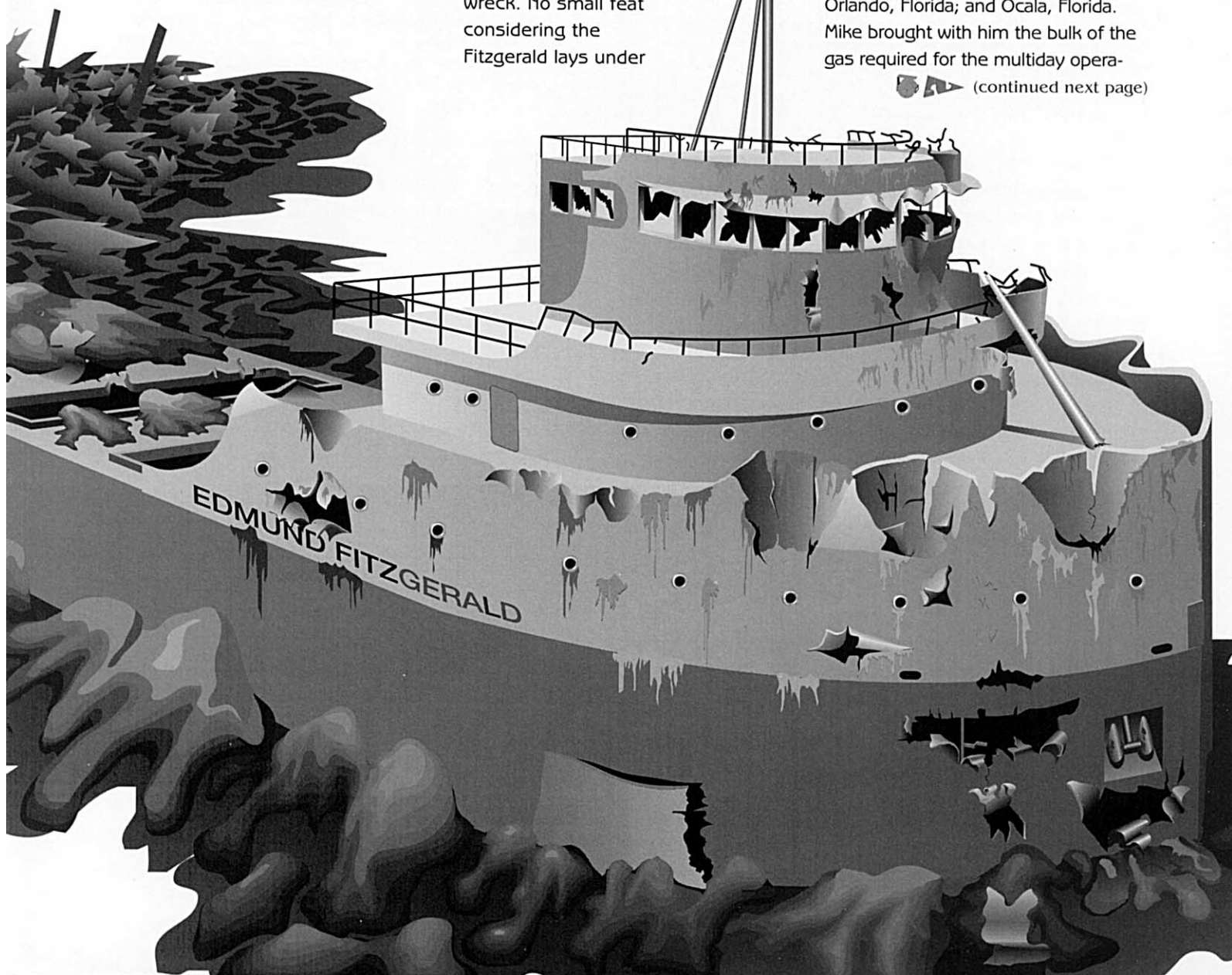
Mike decided that 1995 was the year he would touch the Edmund Fitzgerald with his gloved hand as the first scuba diver to reach the wreck. No small feat considering the Fitzgerald lays under

540 feet of 36°F water in Lake Superior. For reasons known only to Mike, he decided to extend to me, the undeserved invitation to make the attempt with him. Needless to say I jumped at the opportunity.

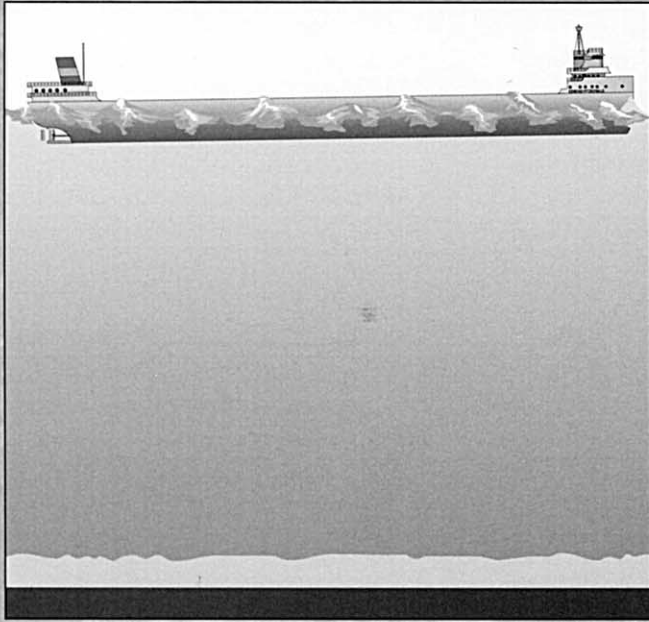
After months of secretive planning and Mike's patient attempts to track me down via phone, we arrived at a tentative dive plan. We agreed to meet for this undertaking in the waning days of August. The original plan called for the team to assemble the third week of the month, but last minute delays prevented my departure for nearly a week.

Mike journeyed from Chicago, his home town. The rest of the small team traveled from Ontario, Canada; Orlando, Florida; and Ocala, Florida. Mike brought with him the bulk of the gas required for the multiday opera-

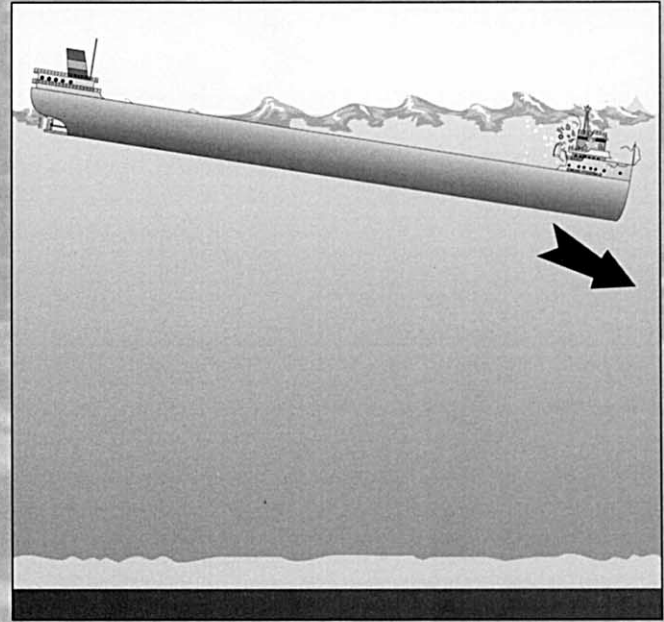
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## The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald—A Theory



With Lake Superior winds gusting to 90 miles per hour and the waves cresting 25 feet the Fitzgerald began taking on water and listing to the left. The captain maintained power and tried to keep the bow pointed into the wind and the breaking waves.



The Fitzgerald bit deeply into an especially huge wave. The bow was driven completely underwater. The weight of the flooding water, combined with the engines and forward momentum drove the vessel underwater like a torpedo. It is believed that the Fitzgerald sank in less than a minute.

tion. I brought the two in-water support divers, Ken Furman and Mauro Porcelli. Our long journey from Florida was made in a compact pickup truck. We survived the trip by having one of us sleep in the bed of the truck, buried in stage bottles and doubles, while the other two drove in relative comfort. We rotated driving duty throughout the 27 hour nonstop trip.

We arrived in the town of Paradise, Michigan at 3 a.m. where we met our gracious hosts for the week, Chris and Debbie of Heidi's Traveler's Motel. These generous people donated the accommodations for the whole team at their own expense. It was during this initial late night meeting that we met Mike's business partner and Captain of the RV First One; Randy Sullivan of Lake Superior Dive Tours.

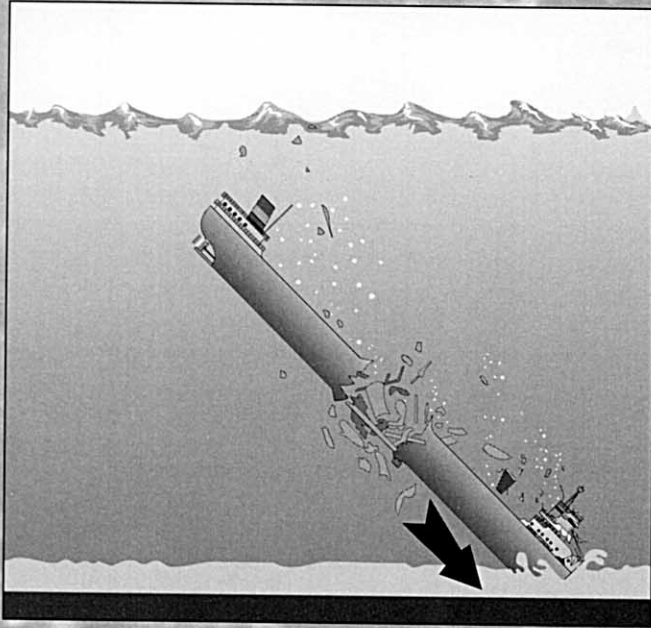
The first impression I received of Lake Superior was that of a large, calm lake. It looked as if the objective

would come off without a hitch, so we chose the first day for a tune up dive. The main concern for the tune up dives was getting everyone accustomed to the low water temperatures (36°F). The wreck that Mike chose for the first dive was the S.S. Osbourn a steamship that sunk after a collision. We conducted a complete run through of the Fitzgerald dive simulating the descent and bottom phases, including support team activities. We learned a great deal from this practice.

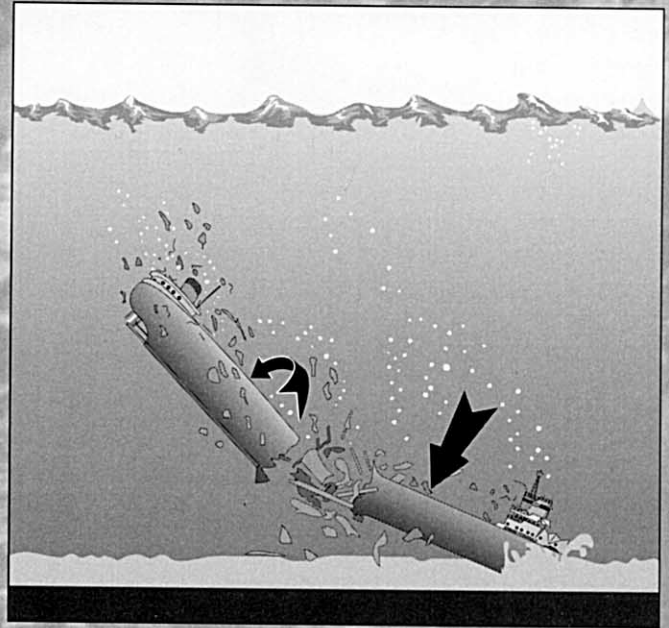
Upon reaching the Osbourn it became obvious what Charlie Tulip, Greg Zambeck, Mike, and the other veteran Great Lake divers had been telling me for years—that the wrecks located in their backyard are absolutely without comparison. I was absolutely awed viewing wrecks sunk in the 1800's with the rigging still in place. To see china, silverware, and other artifacts still resting undisturbed had a profound impact on me.

What I didn't know at the time, is that the lake had a small demonstration of her famed fury in store for us. Within hours of the completion of our first practice dive the weather changed the lake from millpond calm to ten foot, close set, steep faced waves, the likes of which I had never before seen. With winds gusting at thirty knots, the goal of our journey seemed as far away as ever.

Since there was no chance of diving during this storm, which was only average by Great Lakes standards, we used the opportunity to debrief the tune up dive and conduct a second simulated dry run of the planned dive, this time in the motel courtyard. This raised a few eyebrows from the other patrons of the motel but it tightened up the team, and gave everyone a chance to ask questions and offer suggestions. We decided if the weather cleared we would make the first available attempt to reach the Edmund Fitzgerald.



Plunging down at a steep angle the bow was driven 25 feet into Lake Superior's mud bottom until it hit bed rock. Approximately 200 feet of the ship's mid section completely disintegrated from the tremendous impact.



With the ship torn in half the stern section rolled to port and landed upside down approximately 170 feet from the bow. The bow settled into the mud upright.

When we woke up the next morning, the winds had slowed a little but they were still in the twenty knot range, the chances of diving the Fitzgerald did not look good for the third day in a row. The team, however, gamely decided to make the attempt anyway. We left the dock in marginal conditions and were holding our own until our boat, the First One, rounded Whitefish Point. I have no doubt that the boat could have made it to the wreck site, but none of us would have been in any shape to conduct the dive. Suitably humbled, I realized I was unable to fathom what the men on the Fitzgerald had experienced in their final hours.

The only hope we had of pulling off the dive was a break in the weather expected the next morning. This would be our last chance, since Randy and the boat were needed elsewhere, and I had to leave that next afternoon as well.


Gloriously, the next morning, September 1, 1995, was a day made to order. There was a slight breeze out of the west, and bright sunlight dancing off the six-inch waves. Our opportunity had arrived. We were out of the harbor and rounding the point by 9:30 a.m. At 11:00 am we found ourselves seventeen miles from Whitefish Point, floating motionless above the most famous of the Great Lakes Wrecks, the S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald.

The team worked quickly until everything was ready for the dive to begin. Randy deftly kept the boat positioned above the wreck, and simultaneously lowered the special deep camera that would confirm our position over the wreck, as well as serve as our descent and ascent line. Mike and I were wearing similar gear configurations consisting of doubles (120 cu. ft. cylinders for Mike, 104 cu. ft. cylinders for me) filled with bottom mix, and an air filled 120 cu. ft. cylinder mounted

pyramid triple fashion between our doubles—to be used as our travel gas. On our left we carried a 45 cu. ft. cylinder filled with a transitional mix that we hoped would help us combat counter diffusion problems on ascent. On my right side I decided to carry a spare 80 cu. ft. cylinder of air in the event one of us developed a malfunction in one of our triples. The only other cylinder we carried was our precious Argon for suit inflation.

All of the bottom mix regulators were Poseidon's. On our triples we carried Scubapro Mk15 D400's. All decompression bottles carried either Poseidon or Scubapro regulators. All connectors were DIN style.

After entering the water Mike and I proceeded to the camera line. Randy notified us of the camera location which was just off the bottom next to the port bow of the Fitzgerald. Upon completion of our

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down, this time with Mauro. Presumably, the two of them arrived at our location thinking that Mike and I were incapable of decompressing without embarrassing ourselves. I had managed to temporarily solve my problem by breathing directly from the nitrox cylinder valve. I opened the valve and sipped some nitrox when I needed to inhale and then immediately closed it while exhaling. By the time we arrived in the balmy 40 degree water of the shallower stops, the regulator had thawed enough for me to open the valve and the regulator functioned flawlessly from that point forward.

Meanwhile, Mauro and Randy had deployed the surface supplied oxygen so we could begin the final phase of the decompression. We took air breaks every 25 minutes to limit our Central Nervous System (CNS) exposure. Mauro then took over baby-sitting duty, relieving Mike and myself of our extra stage bottles to make our longer decompression stops more comfortable. One of the handy things about hanging in the lake was that when you got thirsty at least you had water readily available to drink.

Once we had completed the required stops Mike and I slowly surfaced, where Ken and Mauro helped us remove our triples in the water with as little exertion as possible. Then, we added our own safety factor by breathing oxygen for thirty more minutes while lazily floating on the surface.

Reflecting back on the dive I am left with a couple of impressions and thoughts. The first is that of gratitude: gratitude for Mike asking me to accompany him, gratitude for surviving a dive where sucking gas from a cylinder valve became necessary, and especially gratitude for Ken, Mauro and Randy who made the dive possible with their expert support. I've thought often of the Fitzgerald since the dive. The mighty ship seems lonely in the cold dark water beneath Lake Superior. It is astonishing to think that an enormous ship like the Fitzgerald can be sunk by a storm on a lake. Gordon Lightfoot was right when he said that Superior never gives up her dead. 🙏

*Terrence Tysall is an explorer, a former U.S. Navy Seal, and the co-owner of the Orlando Dive Center (ODC) in Orlando, Florida. He conducts special dive expeditions throughout the United States, Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean through the ODC.*

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