



By mid-March 1942 not only was the East Coast U-boat war in full swing, it was at the height of its destruction. From Maine to Florida the merchant fleet was in imminent peril. The Navy did its best to provide patrol craft but was woefully undermanned and short of warships. The only alternative was to arm tankers and freighters so they might defend themselves against the enemy. The Navy supplied both guns and gunners.

"Because ships had been torpedoed off the Diamond Shoals every single night for the previous week, the Liberator's armed guard was understandably itchy. The entire gun crew camped at their gun post on the fantail and kept a sharp lookout for suspicious, low-lying vessels. Johannes Liebe was no ordinary U-boat commander. Just as he did with the *Australia* three days before, he out-psyched Allied thinkers. Only this time he went one better. He brought his U-boat close to the Diamond Shoals and fired outward-and-in broad daylight. His torpedo ripped into the Liberator's port hull just as she changed course northward."

Similar fates doomed or awaited the *Lancing*, *Empire Gem*, *Australia*, *City of Atlanta*, *Dixie Arrow*, *EM Clark*, *British Splendour*, *Manuela*, *Malchase*, and almost all of the shipwrecks with the exceptions of the *Proteus*, *Tarpon*, and *FW Abrahms* that suffered less dramatic wartime tragedies. These wrecks, commonly known by divers and fisherman on the Hatteras charts, have become feeding and aggregation centers for pelagic activity.

Fast forward 60 years later for a shoot out in the form of freedivers' spear shafts going into the sides of pelagic fish over the sunken remains of the Graveyard of the Atlantic.

This year's 2nd Annual Omer Hatteras Blue Water Open saw twice the number of participants from last year in ideal conditions. Visibility was in the 50ft range and although last year it was twice as clear the fish were in greater numbers this time around. Roughly ten fish over 55 pounds were weighed in at this year's event with a few wahoo and mahi-mahi thrown in the usual mix of big cobia, pompano, and amberjack. Unfortunately yellowfin tunas eluded the divers who had shots and sightings without the landings. Every one of the 44 divers landed at least one fish over 25lbs and the top ten places all had the magic triple-header of cobia, pompano and amberjack necessary to get into the standings. Participation was diverse with beginner to experienced level entrants from Tennessee, New Jersey, Oregon, Louisiana, North

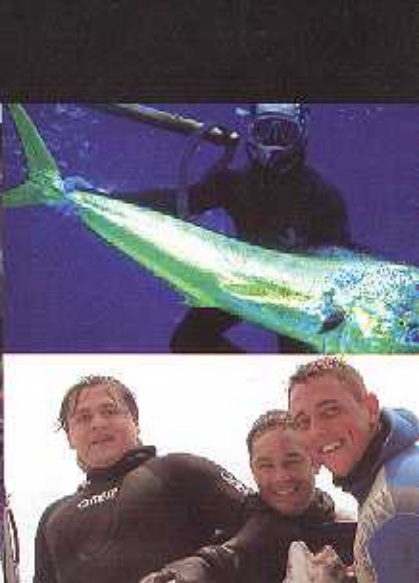
Carolina, California, Texas, Montana, Florida, Virginia, Connecticut, Puerto Rico, Georgia, and Washington, DC. Divers from abroad came from Brazil, Italy, and Canada.

On Friday July 8th, the first day, seas were calm. A light SE wind greeted the boats as they headed in different directions clearing Hatteras Inlet. Some boats ran just a few miles to near shore artificial reefs in less than 80ft while others ran down to the southern end to wrecks like the *Proteus*, *British Splendour* and the *Tarpon*.

Under the blue water tournament rules ten species of fish are eligible with a ten-pound minimum requirement. The species include Bonito, Mahi-mahi, Cobia, King Mackerel, Rainbow Runner, Bluefish, African Pompano, Yellowfin Tuna, Blackfin Tuna and Wahoo. Each fish is worth one point per pound and wahoo, mahi-mahi, and tuna are worth two points per pound. A maximum of five fish can be weighed in by each diver over the course of three days with no upgrading of same species allowed.

Last year it was easier to keep a minute-to-minute report on the VHF of what divers were doing but now with 45 divers and nine boats spread out over the 50 mile radius it was near impossible. The boats that were talking on the radio were mostly the charter boats and their divers were into promised hoards of amberjacks, African pompano, and cobia from the start. As I had hoped, the unseasonable cooler than normal water temperatures had the fish stacked up to Cape Hatteras. The migration of pelagic activity from the Southeastern states following the gulfstream for the summer, I believe, had a lot of fish concentrated over the wrecks ending their northern journey





there, avoiding the frigid harsh break of warm/cold water north of the cape. This interesting phenomenon manifested itself in a convincing way at the weigh-in at the end of the first day. More fish were landed the first day than during the entire course of the three-day tournament last year.

Serious contenders placed their intention to be at the top of the standings right off the bat. Thirty-four fish were weighed in while the others held off hoping for bigger fish the following days. The first day's top five fish at the 5pm weigh-in were Blake Gaylord's 88lb amberjack, Cameron Kirkconnell with a 74lb amberjack, Peter Curtis with a 61lb amberjack, Jason Gredell with a 55lb amberjack and Italy's Marco Figurdin with a 55 pounder. Kirkconnell recounted: "Slipping into the dark green waters we were greeted by a school of small rainbow and blue runners and almost immediately the boys started seeing fish. Down below we could see Amberjacks and the occasional African Pompano and as our breath holds increased we started diving deeper in search of the bigger fish. Laying underneath a 12 foot-er was an amberjack that looked like a torpedo riding underneath a submarine. I stopped kicking at 65 ft and glided down through the other sharks approaching the big jack. As I came to within 10 feet of the shark's tail the amberjack turned slightly to look in my direction and I placed my shot a bit low taking it through both gillplates and sending him into a slow powerful dive. Reaching the surface I started working him to me and within 10 minutes had him up within sight. Attracted by the commotion were a number of other jacks one of which was significantly larger than mine. My elation at the monster fish (74 lbs) only proved to fuel my cousin and dive partner Blake's desire to shoot one and within minutes we could see that he too was secured to a monster jack. On the surface with his lish he called for another gun and with a second shot the 88lb lish was put out of his misery and thrown into the boat. With two monster fish in the boat and a general lack of other species around Rocky (Peter Curtis) closed out the fish box with a 61 lb amberjack and we headed off in search of African Pompano and Cobia"



Cameron Kirkconnell (winner) with 74lb Amberjack

Several cobias and African pompano had been weighed in up to 35lbs as well as a 15 pound mahi-mahi Joey Daniels of North Carolina took. The crew on the Marlin Mania made up of Sasha Bratic, Jerry Guerra Jr and Sr. Guy Nesbit, Gary Sanchez and GR Tarr all had a pompano and an amberjack each and Guy Nesbit had a cobia as well. The level of excitement was high and things were heating up. The ensuing barbecue catered by venue host Hatteras Landing Marina had divers paying attention to the scoreboards and rejoicing after a phenomenal first day. Many beginner and less experienced blue water hunters landed their first big fish and the more experienced divers and veterans from last year were in the running for the points. Whether it was glory they were after, or just fun, everybody was getting some.

Day two began under overcast skies with a tumultuous wind gusting 20-25 knots out of the southwest. The ideal strategy would have been to stay inshore but most divers invariably had their captains steer them offshore heading for the blue water. It was an uncomfortable wet ride in five-foot seas with some bigger seas mixed in at short intervals. The bigger, slower 30-45' boats would have the advantage as the smaller boats couldn't run fast safely. The boats spread out and found pompano, cobia, and amberjacks for the divers who managed to stay calm and dive in the swells. The team from Florida, Cameron Kirkconnell, Blake Gaylord, Peter Curtis, and fellow crew on the "Good-Som-Ting" were immediately busy asserting their lead from the day before. Cameron put a 34lb cobia in the boat and Peter Curtis followed through with a 31lb African Pompano. They now had three fish each. Over the Splendour Larry Sholdt added a 36 pound amberjack to his 34 pound cobia from the previous day while team-mate Ralph Tieman took a 32 pound African Pompano and a 37lb cobia from the same wreck. The two 60-year-old partners were giving the young guns a run for their money in the rough seas. Others were undoubtedly not fairing as well, Russ Karnap happened to be one of them. His catamaran was out from the start of the tournament when he noticed his boat taking on water during scouting days prior to the tournament. The hull was cracked in several places and he spent the time he was supposed to be diving repairing his vessel instead. Another boat, the one I was driving for my fellow Mid Atlantic Freedivers was also about to be decommissioned. After a long wet run in the slop I got concerned when the oil pressure gauge in the Albermarle's Vulva Pentia showed we were losing serious oil pressure. Things were not looking good and the motor was los-

ing steam. We babied it a bit and we managed to get where we were planning to dive but reluctantly we decided it was best to turn her around and head back to the barn for the long 40plus mile run. We limped our way back down sea. After losing some nice cobias and big AJs the day before, Jason Fedida, Alex Wiazlak, and Jason Gredell decided not to test fate in Hatteras for a third consecutive day and called it quits early as an excuse to start the post tournament party at the local "Sand Bar"! It was unfortunate as Alex was third in last year's contest and had a 48lb AJ from the previous day while Jason had a 55 pounder. We'd been diving here enough to know that when things weren't going our way it was better to quit and slay on the side of safety. We'd gone for broke and indeed we'd gotten there but at this point we were just happy to get the boat into the inlet. After I stepped foot on the dock weathered and late for the weigh in it was clear things were not so gloomy for everyone else with divers busy carting some nice fish down the docks with a crowd gathered on the marina balcony overlooking the weigh in. Seventeen time National team Spearfishing champion Bill Ernst who partnered with his girlfriend Bonnie Row, the only lady entrant in the Open, told me this tournament had the most big fish he'd ever seen.

At 6:30 am the next morning all the boats cleared Hatteras Inlet under clear skies, calm winds and flat seas. What a blessing. I sighed as I stood on the dock living vicariously through my comrades on their way to the hunting grounds for one more day of hunting in the gulf-stream. Soon enough the guys on the 41' Hatteras Miss Faye were on the Proteus when a school of yellowfin tunas came crashing through. Matt Head shot a big amberjack and a nice pompano and they knew if he could just entice a yellowfin into range he would have a good shot in placing. They stayed on the wreck all day deciding to forego the weigh-in in hopes of putting one in the box without luck. Not far away, on the Tarpon, Robert Reyes landed a big pompano and he was now trying to entice a flurry of sly wahoo hanging around the wreck into range. After a well-executed descent and stalk he tempted one in and took the shot. For its modest size the wahoo made a screaming run as the guys on the boat watched his float zoom by. The double point fish was worth its weight in gold. The wahoo rose him up ten places good for third overall by day's end. Clearly a contender, Robert later remarked, **"I think that one of the best things that this tournament has is the feeling that you are diving with friends and not in a competition at all. It was great to meet so many good divers and to learn while having fun in a place with so many fish."**

Competitive or not he was the only one able to break the clean sweep from the team on the "Good-Som-Ting" from Florida that was back at the dock by noon. I was on my way to Ocracoke Island by ferry when they pulled their boat alongside the ferry to show me their impressive catch. Cameron Kirkconnell had done it securing the blue water title with a wahoo and his cousin, Blake Gaylord, had a 33 pound cobia to secure second place. There were other magical moments. The Brazilian duo of Francisco Loffredi and Paulo Junior, both of whom didn't weigh in a single fish yet and were plagued with bad luck, were outdoing themselves the last day! A big sand tiger noticed Paulo's circling amberjack and started following it in close circles. The ten foot sand tiger couldn't turn as sharply as the desperate amberjack but eventually he managed to get hold of it and took half of it leaving Paulo with the upper half. He weighed in the 26lb head along with a cobia and a pompano and Francisco also weighed in three fish with the biggest cobia of the tournament at 43 lbs. Another diver, Leo Ramos, who returned from a top ten place last year was having a hideous tournament until day three. He and his girlfriend had driven up from Miami and broken down in Georgia the day before the start missing day one waiting for a part for their car to arrive. The second day after getting to Hatteras, Leo took a beating in the rough seas without a fish. Day three, on the other hand, was a gift from Neptune to Leo and he shot three fish worth 90 points good enough for 9th place. The day came to an end. The weigh in was another display of Hatteras pelagic abundance with loads of spectacular fish being carted down the



docks. There was also a lot of exciting video and underwater photography taken. Bonnie Row captured some great scenes of life under some flotsam and the mahimahi it attracted and photographer Russell Blackwood took some stunning frames of divers in action. The sand tiger shark populations that hang around the wrecks always put on a great show as one diver put it: **"Ron and I both saw a small wahoo come cruising through when I took a long shot and lost him during the first run due to his soft flesh. We located the school of resident Sand Tiger sharks hanging at 80 feet in a group of 12 or so. Diving down to that depth and seeing that many sharks in the 10-14 ft range is an amazing experience and not having much experience with these sharks all of us were wondering what would happen when we started shooting fish down deep and bringing them up through them."**

The docile and well-fed sharks are there to remind divers of the abundant food source and the richness these waters provide even large sharks like sand tigers. It's a multitude of factors like this that I always try to remind divers not to take for granted and to respect for future generations to enjoy. Some day when I have kids I would like to take them spearfishing there to enjoy the same our tribe of blue water hunters has.

All the divers who entered the 2nd Annual Omer Hatteras Open were treated to a nice awards banquet for their efforts at the Pilot House Restaurant and my company donated \$5,000 in prizes and some beautiful trophies for those who earned them. Thank you for participating and making it an exciting event to look forward to again over winter. **PAU**

RESULTS

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|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Cameron Kirkconnell FL (African pompano 17lbs, Amber Jack 74, cobia 24, wahoo 32) | 6. Francisco Loffredi BRAZIL (WAP 32, AJ 38, cobia 48) |
| 2. Blake Gaylord FL (WAP 17, AJ 66, cobia 33) | 7. Sasa Drafic FL (WAP 35, AJ 46, cobia 26) |
| 3. Roberto Reyes PR (WAP 31, AJ 48, cobia 22, wahoo 14) | 8. Jerry Guerra Jr. FL (WAP 29, AJ 47, cobia 25) |
| 4. Peter Curtis FL (WAP 21, AJ 53, cobia 26) | 9. Leo Ramos FL (WAP 74, AJ 33, cobia 23) |
| 5. Ralph Thomas CA (WAP 32, AJ 45, cobia 37) | 10. Larry Shurt CA (WAP 16, AJ 36, cobia 34) |