

Diving the SMS Dresden Wreck

An Overview

When the Dresden sank she came to settle on an underwater mound. As a result the wreck is resting on an incline with the northward pointing bow sitting in 25 metres of water. The remainder of the ship slopes southward toward the stern at 38 metres.

The Dresden is similar to the other cruisers with a length of 115 metres and a beam of 12 metres. However, she is unique amongst the German wrecks of Scapa Flow in that she fell away to her port side.

This is often the first dive of a Scapa week as the shallower bow section allows for more conservative shakedown dives. The deeper stern section is often returned to later in the week. It is easier to do a multi-level profile dive on the wreck thanks to this incline, hence shot lines are maintained at both the bow and the stern.

Regular visitors and local divers continue to find Dresden an intriguing wreck. She has retained her shape well and many original features remain inside, providing a captivating throwback to life on the ship nearly 100 years ago.

Bow Section

The port anchor lies away out from the wreck and the chain snakes its way across the seabed from the port hawse pipe.

The stem slopes upwards at an angle of 30 degrees or so toward the keel, clearly marking the seabed slope the ship rests on.

The deck level at very tip of the bow appears like the shape of a crown, moulded to feed mooring ropes to the securing bollards on the wharf with the minimum of chaffing points.

Just set onto the hull behind the stem lies the ship's shield. All that is visible now is the shape of a shield, maybe six feet in length and raised by about six inches. Behind the shield is the massive recess where the anchor would have been stowed into the bow.

Somewhere about here the deck starts to fall away from the hull. Imagine the lid of a sardine can parting along one edge and the effect is not dissimilar. Each successive year has seen the gap widen and lengthen so now the deck is almost upside down on the seabed all the way to the bridge.

The capstans are a different design to the other cruisers, with a flatter top embossed with star-shaped ribs. The capstan shafts held the weight of the parting deck for a number of years until they gave up the fight and pulled clear of the capstan engines. Recent years have seen the next deck fall out too whilst the starboard hull plates have fallen down to the seabed.

Deep in the hull at this point the white enamelled remains of a bath rest eerily in the fine silt. Above, doors and hatchways hang open, some with the springs and hydraulic rams designed to cope with their armoured weight clearly visible.

In service there would have been two 5.9 inch guns on the forward deck. These have both been salvaged, though the remains of the mounts are still evident.

Armoured Control Tower and Bridge

The next recognisable structure back is the curved face of the cylindrical Armoured Control Tower. The walls are protected by four-inch thick armoured steel, the hinges of the door can be clearly seen, though not opened, and a line of viewing slits span the front edge. The room is inaccessible but the contents can just about be made out by carefully shining a torch through a viewing slit. Three round holes on the roof mark the position where the sighting optics would have been mounted.

Originally the bridge would have joined onto the top of the Armoured Control Tower but it has fallen away with time. The side still contains a few portholes but, like a pack of cards, the structure has fallen away from the ship.

Two searchlight platforms located on the mast above the bridge are evident from the remains of the searchlight gimbals and irises. The foremast stretches away across the seabed, the supporting wires resting in a triangular pattern.

A 5.9 inch gun lies in its original position alongside the bridge on the starboard side.

Boiler Rooms

Most of the ship's length is taken up by the boiler rooms which are still sealed and inaccessible. Fire bricks that once insulated the deck have fallen away in a small white pile just behind the bridge whilst the gratings that would have sat at the base of the now-missing funnels still provide a frustrating barrier to the boilers below.

Running along the boiler rooms and offering protection lie the coal bunkers. Hatches and light access points are broken open, spilling out lumps of coal.

Massive davits overhang at this point, fixed to the port edge of the ship, their ends punching into the seabed below. The boiler, engine and hard machinery are all that remain from one of the ship's pinnaces (boats), almost obscured in the wreckage of the main wreck.

Just at the stern end of the boiler rooms, the barrette, breach and mounting posts of the aft high-elevation guns mark the start of the salvage blast area. There are two 88 mm guns, one here and a second in the wreckage further towards the stern pointing aft.

Engine Rooms

Much of the engine rooms was blasted during the salvage operation but a surprising amount of machinery remains, as the workers were often only after specific components like the condensers. The Dresden had geared turbines, both of which can be made out in the wreckage. Most of the turbines are overhung with the remains of hull plates so they are not immediately evident but, with exploration, the pieces start to make sense.

Officers' Accommodation

The officers' accommodation on the aft deck retains most of its shape, culminating in another bath just forward of the rear deck gun. It is strange to think that an officer could have been taking a bath whilst a mere few feet away sailors could have been loading and aiming a gun. Cables and pipes hang down and heating coils litter the area.

There are two deck guns at the stern, one mounted on the roof of the officers' accommodation and able to fire over the very aft gun. A stern capstan would have serviced the very last kedge anchor which remains stowed in the aft hawse. Like the Karlsruhe there are four cutaways with hinged bases set into the stern on the hull. The remains of a lifting derrick lie on the seafloor.

Stern

The seabed at the stern is sticky with an oily tar, presumably from the wreck. The vessel has retained her shape well here and shows the beauty of these ships. The rudder lies in place with the remains of the two A-frames either side.

Conclusion

The sloping seabed upon which Dresden rests seems to have contributed more to her deterioration than the salvage teams. The wreck is slowly turning turtle and the resultant forces continue to work their worst. At the stern the deck is now coming away from the hull along its top edge.

In 2004 the top deck of the bow separated from the hull and fell away. As time goes by the internal decks have begun to fall away in the same manner. It is this sheer force that will ultimately seal the sad demise of the Dresden.

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