

Diving the SMS Markgraf Wreck

An Overview

The Markgraf, a König class battleship, needs to be dived several times before she is understood but, given this time and understanding, she becomes a first-class dive and a stunning example of a World War I dreadnought.

The wreck lies almost completely upturned in 45 metres of water with her bows pointing roughly north-west. She is open on the starboard side where the superstructure has prevented the ship rolling over completely and it is along this edge that much of the interest lies.

Diving the Markgraf is to feel like an ant running through a Meccano set. All the shapes of the components are recognisable but huge in scale. Because the wreck is so intact in identifiable areas, such as the rudders, bow and stern, the sheer massive size of the ship is evident in a way that is not quite so tangible for the other six.

By the time salvage work started on the Markgraf the men were very practised and adept at their art so the blasting is precise, accurate and concentrated with little structural collateral damage. Each paragraph below can be a dive in itself so time exploring is precious and hard fought. This is a wreck that can be visited time and time again without exhausting the chance to see new sights and go to new areas.

Bow Section

The sight of the bows of the Markgraf rising from the seabed is a defining image that divers carry away from Scapa. The stem rises in a sheer line, straight up from the seabed, until the hull starts to run along to the keel.

Once again the sense of scale is impressive, emphasised by the integrity of the wreck, and the shape is unique and classic dreadnought, probably the only place left in the world that this view can be seen. Swimming back from the bow, alongside the Markgraf at seabed level, the wreck towers overhead. The route passes the massive anchor hawse pipe and then over the start of the armour belt. The steel armour encases the hull and the thickness of the steel is easy to discern.

The salvage blasting opened the hull to get at the non-ferrous metal of the torpedo rooms that ran laterally across the hull at this point. The damage extends in a deep V-shape down to the seabed, exposing the innards of the ship. On the forward face of the damage all the mechanism for the anchor capstans, including massive gears and shafts, can be made out. On the stern face, the front of the barrette is visible.

Although it sounds trivial to mention common components that are on all ships, like gears and hawse pipes, the importance of the observation is that the scale is so enormous. Most divers have seen these components on other wrecks and will recognise them but it is their size that gives pause for thought and nowhere is this more evident than on the Markgraf.

Hull

The anchor chain wrapped around the ship as she turned to sink and now lies in a route that traverses the hull and descends the side as a distinctive landmark, just aft of the torpedo room blast-break. Moving aft, along the side of the hull, passes the line of armour plate that has been removed. The internal structure of the ship is exposed revealing ribs and internal bulkheads, spaces that would have been filled with coal as an extra line of defence.

The seven casemate guns run in a line at deck level, deeper in the water, and all seven can be seen with varying levels of ease. The first two hang down before the run is interrupted by the mast that protrudes from the side of the ship, bent over as the ship turned. It is a short swim out to the spotting top and the two platforms where men would have kept look-out in battle, watching the fall of shot and correcting the aim of the guns.

Moving aft, the armour belt has been largely salvaged and the first two deck levels have collapsed. The next three casemate guns point forward before the sixth bucks the trend and points aft. There is a pile of wreckage out from the side of the hull at this point that is the remains of the A-frame and associated structures left behind during the removal of the propellers and the aft torpedo room. Two rows of portholes along the side of the officers' accommodation complete the run to the stern section.

Stern Section

Another of the defining images of Scapa is the twin rudders at the stern of the Markgraf rising straight up from the upturned hull. They are 3.5 metres in height and remain fixed in place to this day, undamaged by either the scuttle or the salvage, and they dwarf the divers swimming between them.

In stark contrast, the abiding impression from the rest of the stern is how small and petite this section of the ship actually is. The rest of the wreck feels massive, built with an immovable solidity, but the stern belies this with a beauty and grace of line. Double tramlines of rivets mark the joining of deck plates and lead to the seabed in a gentle curve.

Moving forward again the route passes over the damage where the propellers have been salvaged. The A-frames are absent, apart from the broken stubs, but the shaped form of the hull to encompass the propellers is still clear before breaking up again at the start of the engine rooms.

Engine Rooms

The top of the engine rooms has been blasted and removed and all the low-pressure turbines removed. They have been cleanly taken, leaving empty space dotted with cables, valves and broken pipework. The three prop shafts poke from the aft end of the wreckage. The high-pressure turbines remain in the forward rooms, just visible through a bulkhead.

The bottom of the hull slopes gently away to the right as you swim forward, a vast expanse of metal that feels deceptively like the seabed. A bilge keel runs on the left-hand side with the only other interruption being three small blast holes halfway to the bow, made by salvage teams to test their location on the ship.

Conclusion

In many ways the Markgraf is the jewel in the Scapa crown, an impressive warship in an area where impressive warships reign. It is this wreck more than any other which brings divers back to Scapa Flow time and time again.

The wreck is on a scale that surpasses anything experienced elsewhere in the world and is in superb condition, particularly considering the time she has been underwater, which bodes well for the future of diving in Scapa Flow.