

Diving the SMS König Wreck

An Overview

The König is the hardest of the battleships to describe. Without a general knowledge of battleships, and time spent on the other two resting in the Flow, the König can just seem to be a big jumble of plates.

However, with time and exploration, she probably makes the best dive of the three. Areas exposed on the König are often still enclosed on her sisters, allowing easy exploration of places that are inaccessible on the other two.

The König sank further south than her sister ships. She too lies upside down, turned turtle by the immense topside weight of her armour and armaments, with the starboard side superstructure exposed. The wreck lies with the bows pointing north in a maximum depth of approximately 38 metres with the topsides in 18 to 20 metres of water.

The first few dives on her can be an exercise in frustration. The wreck feels almost completely upturned so it is harder to access her topside accommodation. The salvage operation has been crude and untidy, making the usual visual markers harder to recognise. And she lies in deeper water. For these reasons, she is the least frequently dived of the trio and it is usually only the more experienced divers that request her. However, with patience and persistence, the König comes alive, rewarding curiosity and investigation.

Construction

All three battleships remaining in Scapa belong to the König class (of which the König is the namesake) and, as such, they are similar in construction with only minor variations from the theme. The construction is described more fully within the information for the Kronprinz Wilhelm.

In brief, the König had ten 12 inch guns in five turrets, all on the midline of the ship. Either side there were seven 5.9 inch casemate guns with another ten smaller calibre guns completing her deck arsenal (six of which were removed after the Battle of Jutland) and five torpedo tubes below the waterline. Of these, only the seven casemate guns on the port side can still be seen in their entirety. It is possible to make out parts of some of the others if you know what to look for.

All these were protected by the 12-inch thick steel walls of the armoured citadel and driven through the water at 21 knots by 43,000hp through three propellers. In their day, these ships cost 45 million marks to build.

Due to her massive construction, her inherent design capability to absorb battle damage, and the fact she now rests upside down, the König has survived being underwater well.

However, she was one of the first of the battleships to receive attention from the later rounds of salvage operations. They learned their craft on the König and it shows. Their poor knowledge of the ship's construction required blasting exploratory holes just to test where they were. As a result blast damage is considerable, especially in comparison to the Markgraf. However, these crude operations exposed areas that are still intact on the other ships, much to the diver's benefit.

The salvage teams removed the condensers from all three battleships and, in doing so, removed the

attached low-pressure turbines. However, one low pressure turbine was left behind on the König and is still visible today.

Diving the König

Bow Section

It is hard to make out the shape of the König's bows. There is some structure left but the hull has collapsed down to the seabed due to the blasting in the torpedo rooms. The ship is deceptive because, at first glance, she appears to have turned further than the other two but in reality is probably more open, a realisation that only dawns slowly.

The blasting from the lateral forward torpedo room extends down to the seabed, exposing the barbette of the A-gun and wreckage from the anchor capstan mechanism. The blasting was pretty severe and caused much of the wreck to collapse in on itself.

Midships

The salvage teams removed a run of high-value, thick armour belt from both sides of the ship. As a consequence, the armour deck has fallen down taking with it the first six casemate guns which now rest upside down on the seabed.

Crude blasting threw a lot of wreckage from higher up the hull onto the seabed, alongside the ship, so there are many components that are recognisable such as ribs and spars in amongst the jumble. It is possible to see the side of A-turret, into some of the boiler room and into other areas of the innards where the armour deck has fallen down.

Stern Section

The beautiful lines and shape of the battleship stern are not so evident on the König, destroyed by blasting. One of the two rudders rises vertically from the hull, slightly distorted though still recognisable.

The skin has fallen away exposing the supporting internal structure, adding interest in a kind of Haynes Manual or Fred Dibnah way – if you like that sort of thing! It is also possible to see the manual steering wheels in the wreckage.

Running forward from the rudders, the hull rises sharply up at this point and there is a choice of routes, each with their own interest.

Staying shallower, the port shaft can be followed along the wreckage, past a bank of gas cylinders and over a shaft generator. More centrally, the aftermost wall of the armoured citadel is exposed at this point. At almost 12-inches thick, the steel can barely be spanned by a man's hand, yet the designers have curved the wall to accommodate the last turret and mated consecutive plates with precise dovetail joints.

Aft turret

With another hop over a wall of wreckage, a large circular hole appears in the wreckage, roughly two metres in diameter. This is the bottom of the barbette within which the D-turret (the fourth of five in the order A to E) would have rotated, now exposed by blasting.

The whole turret assembly turned on a ring of massive ball bearings just below the gunhouse floor, at about deck level on the ship, so the descending structure – including the hydraulic room and elevator shafts – would have been suspended below this point.

The rectangular opening at the bottom of the shaft is exposed and clearly visible. It is here that shells and cordite charges would have started their journey to the gun breaches before being fired at the

enemy.

The only other place to see this part of a turret in Scapa Flow is on the guns from the Bayern. They fell clear of the ship during her 1933 salvage and remain on the seabed.

Engine Room

The whole of the ship's bottom was removed over the engine room. Two of the turbines were removed, leaving four. Of these, three are buried in wreckage but one is clearly visible, illustrating the scale and precision of the engineering superbly. This one small area itself is worthy of a whole dive as so many parts remain.

Swimming forward (over the top of the high-pressure turbines) leads to another break in the hull where the start of the boiler rooms have been breached, exposing one of the aft boilers which now resembles a spider's web of small bore tubes.

The hull then runs forward at this point, over a crumpled zone created by additional blasting, before disintegrating again at the forward torpedo room.

Overall Impression

If you know what to appreciate on the König, and understand the components, the diving is superbly rewarding.

However, divers that have not done their homework or do not know what they are looking at will be lost quite quickly. Many divers often want to include the König in their itinerary just to complete the set but first-timers are often better served by repeating one of the other two battleships.

The area around the engine room is worth a visit just for the sight of the turbine alone and this is the only wreck in the Flow where it is possible to see the bottom deck of the barbette.

The more experienced will find a different part of this ship to explore every time. This is a brilliant wreck and is the reward for time spent on the other battleships.

In addition, because it is less visited, the marine life is relatively undisturbed and delicate animals thrive away from the high diver traffic on the other wrecks.