



Trip Report by Iain Smith

Photos illustrating the German wrecks can be found at the [Guns and Armour of Scapa Flow](#) project site. More information about the Orkneys and their wrecks is provided at the [Scapa Flow and its Wrecks](#) site.

Some History of Scapa Flow

In the confusion at the end of the First World War, the Admiral commanding the German High Seas Fleet, Ernst von Reuter, found himself interned in Scapa Flow. Relying on out-of-date British newspapers, he was led to believe that the Armistice negotiations were breaking down. Faced with the prospect of his command being ignobly seized, he signalled the entire fleet to commit the greatest act of naval suicide in history, sending 74 capital ships to the bottom of the Flow.

Various salvage operations between the wars lifted all but seven of the warships which, together with various smaller craft, form the core of diving in the Orkneys. However, as time and sea-water take their inevitable toll, these once magnificent symbols of national pride are crumbling deep beneath the waves. For this reason, dive skippers are diversifying their operations, allowing divers to explore the many other wrecks in Orkney's water.

CUUEG Divers:

- Devin Mackenzie
 - Phil Rae
 - Tom Riley
 - Iain Smith
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The Trip

Diving took place from the *MV Karin*, skippered by John Thornton of Scapa Technical. Although a liveboard, we tied up alongside every night, in various ports around the islands.

Twelve dives were made from the *Karin* in the course of the trip. Six of these were on naval wrecks in the Flow and six on other Orkney wrecks. Devin also made a number of dives from another boat, including trimix diving on *HMS Hampshire*, which took Lord Kitchner to the bottom. (As a war grave, the *Hampshire* is subject to strict restrictions on diving. In this case, special permission was obtained from the Royal Navy.)

For Tom and myself, Scapa provided a first opportunity to dive breathing Nitrox (oxygen-enriched air) following qualification on the BSAC West Scotland Expedition two weeks before.

04 July 1999

SMS Cöln, light cruiser

Lying on her starboard side in approximately 35m the *Cöln* is reasonably intact. This was probably one of the better wrecks to begin on, as it

was comparatively easy to identify *Characteristic* structures such as bollards, the control tower, capstans, anchor chains and lifeboat davits. This proved useful later in the week with more broken wrecks, where the twisted metal made it more difficult to spot things. Tom and I dropped on the shotline, which is tied off approximately one third of the way along from the stern. The holes where the funnels had attached were distinguishable as we descended further and swam towards the bow. Here we found the control tower, from where the *Cóín* would have been fought. Turning back along the port gunwale we passed lifeboat davits and the breech and armour of a 5.9" gun. Unfortunately, we missed the guns on the bow, as we had to turn back to stay within our planned profile. Having gone below 30m, we conducted a three minute safety stop at 6m before surfacing.

Tabarka, blockship

The afternoon dive was in 16m in Burra Sound. Sunk to protect the Flow from enemy ships, the *Tabarka* provided some swim-throughs, and penetration with only limited no-clear-surface conditions. Apparently, the boilers and engines are still in place. At one point, Tom and I were only one compartment away from them, though, frustratingly, we did not see them.

Having gone in at slack, we were shielded from the building current as we explored the lee side of the wreck. Coming to the end (whether bow or stern I am unsure) we saw kelp streaming horizontally. Movement against a strong current was achieved by hauling ourselves along the bottom, until we found an entrance which lead to a clear-surface compartment. Towards the end of the dive, it became impossible to work against the current.

We deployed a delayed SMB from the lee side of the wreck. However, as it was caught by the current, we were pendulumed towards the surface. A piece of advice from the West Scotland expedition came to mind a little too late: "When deploying a buoy in a current, release it, and fin like buggery!"

05 July 1999

SMS König, battleship

Devin having gone off with some of his technical mates, Phil, Tom and I dived as a trio for the next series of dives, beginning with a 35m dive on the *König*. At almost 180m long, and 30m wide, she presents a huge amount to see, despite the fact that the weight of the fighting-top flipped the ship over as it went down. Regrettably, most of the superstructure is thus buried deep within the mud on the bottom of the flow. The wreck has been blasted, in a number of places, making orientation difficult. Early in the dive I was delighted to find a lost diver's reel on the bottom. However, it turned out to belong to one of the other divers on the boat (and was labelled as such, so I really had to give it back!) Although I was never quite sure where we were, we did pass what was probably the beginning of a mast. At one point, Tom grabbed Phil and myself did a volte-face and shot backwards. He claimed to have seen a huge fish...we suspected narcosis!

Coming across the top (bottom!) of the wreck, I saw what I think were a pair of rudder/propellor assemblies. These were probably from a lifeboat, or a 50ft tender boat (pinnacle), though positive identification was well nigh impossible.

During our 6m safety stop, we discovered the difficulties of maintaining depth while others climb a line below you!

During our lunchtime surface interval, we headed out of the Flow and up the northwest coast of the islands. On the way, we sailed past Lord Kitchner's memorial. Offshore, we could see the boat which Devin was diving from, holding position over the *Hampshire's* final resting place.



High above the final resting-place of HMS Hampshire, the Kitchner Memorial looks out over the chill North Atlantic.

For those of us restricted to less exotic gases than trimix, the afternoon wreck was the *Tomalina*. In 26m of water and outside the sheltered waters of Scapa Flow, this former smolt (young salmon) transport provided a welcome change from the 5m visibility in the Flow. (We were unlucky - the "viz" can be up to 20m or more). The *Tomalina* was small enough that the entire wreck was visible from the any point along it. This is reassuring, because there is never any question about where you are. Near the bows was a doorway, and in the starboard hull was a hole. Through both of these, penetration was possible, but as we were diving as a threesome we felt that it was too tight to do so safely.

Swimming out beyond the bows, we drifted over a kelp bed, before popping up a dSMB and surfacing.

06 July 1999

To give people a chance to "off-gas" some of their accumulated nitrogen, the day's diving was kept shallow. The first wreck, the *Char*, was in only 15m, was very broken, and though it provided a few minutes amusement with swim-throughs, was essentially a very boring pile of scrap metal. The afternoon, however, redeemed the day, with (in my opinion) the second best dive of the trip - a pair of steamers in 25m. We spent the entire dive on only one of them, thought to be called the *Endeavour*.

We descended on a shotline, just off the stern. The propellor and rudder were in place and intact. We first circled the wreck at seabed level. The hull was encrusted with dead men's fingers, and under the starboard side, we found a huge lobster. Clearly versed in survival techniques, it kept its distance from us, then later evaded the attempts of our Welsh shipmates to prod it out of its retreat with a large pole!

Exploring the deck level, we found a maze-like area forward (presumably once cabins), which had enough clear-surface openings, to allow finning around inside. In the stern, I dropped through the erstwhile deck, thought about having a look-see further forward (it appears that a diver could swim forward, then up through a vertical passage, emerging midships) However, it seemed like a bad idea to give Phil and Tom apoplexy, so I came back!

To finish the dive, we decided to go looking for the second steamer, heading off about 45 degrees to the port side of the hull (no idea of the real bearing). After about 150m, it was clear that there was nothing there. We came back on a reciprocal (someone was following a bearing anyway!) and ascended the shotline, doing a two minute deco-stop and two minutes safety, at 6m.

07 July 1999

Manina - 12kt cargo vessel

The *Karin* left port while we were still asleep, heading about 50 miles offshore, to the *Manina*. On a slope between 25 and 43m, she lies inverted, with the superstructure lying in pieces underneath her, and in a debris field around her. There is apparently some penetration possible, access being from the under the wreck. Large amounts of life visibility in excess of 40m made this my favourite dive of the week.

After a brief surface interval, we dropped back in on the same site. This time, to avoid massive deco penalties, we stayed comparatively shallow. After playing with seals, we had a brief look through the debris field (just in case...after all, the ship's bell is still unaccounted for!) The most recognisable items were part of the engine, and a large piece of rudder. Having seen pretty much all there was to see, we followed the wall round to the left, (i.e., wall to our left, depth to the right). Many more seals came to inspect us, but kept their distance. Huge numbers of small fish shoaling.

The long journey back to shore provided some "entertainment" in the form of my bagpipes! With a friend's wedding only weeks away, I was desperate to get back into practise, having been somewhat remiss during the exams. The Welsh seemed to enjoy it, while Tom and Phil were diplomatic enough not to turf me overboard! However, the skipper did call down from the bridge, saying that he'd just heard from the Coastguard who were asking if there was something wrong with his boat!

08 July 1999

SMS Dresden, light cruiser

More broken than the *Cöln*, the *Dresden* (32m) is nonetheless an enjoyable dive. The buoy line is attached just aft of the bow (we began the dive by going to see the knife-like bow stabbing proudly forward). As we headed aft, we passed the control tower, then the wreckage of the bridge, which has collapsed sideways (*Dresden* lies on her port side). Further aft is an area of general destruction, followed by the officer's accommodation (which can be penetrated). This lies at an angle to the bow section. One of the Welsh pairs reported that the stern guns are still in place, but we did not see them. Passing forward along the port railings, we saw a 5.9" gun by the starboard side of the bridge, as well as empty lifeboat davits.

F2, escort vessel

Intact only from the bridge forward, the *F2* provides a beautiful example of an intact 4.9" gun on the bow (many guns in the Flow seem to have lost their barrels). There is also a very interesting-looking hatchway beside it. Aft of the bridge is a mess of mangled plates. Unfortunately, this dive was aborted at an early stage, as I was becoming increasingly light-headed. Our best guess is dehydration, as I showed no other symptoms of having had a contaminated fill. We therefore missed out on seeing the salvage vessel which sank next to the *F2*, carrying a pair of salvaged anti-aircraft guns.

09 July 1999

Our last day's diving produced one of the highlights of the week - the trawler *James Barrie*. The dive began with a descent down a very loose shotline against a 0.5kt current. The viz was crystal clear, but surprisingly dark in comparison to the *Manina*. The *James Barrie* lies in 41m, on her starboard side. Penetration is possible, and Devin lead me into the hold to have a look around. We had also been warned that the wheelhouse had a layer of oil at the highest point, and that we should be wary of going inside, lest it foul our regulators, however we saw no signs of this. Further aft was a hatch which might have provided access for further penetration. Left the wreck with 100bar left and ascended

to our deco-stops at 6m. Some confusion over signals left Devin wondering what on earth I was doing hanging around at 6m, while happily saying my computer was clear. Lesson to be learned - before undertaking deco-stop diving, agree how you will indicate stop depths, times and, indeed, whether or not you have stops to carry out.

The afternoon dive was never going to come close to the *James Barrie*, indeed it could not have been much more different. Back in the Flow, with low visibility, and a very, very broken wreck, the *SMS Karlsruhe* was our final dive. In a way though, it provided a fitting conclusion to our week. Only by examining what we saw, and comparing it to what we had seen on the previous naval wrecks, were we able to make much of what was there. Following the shotline down, Phil and I arrived at 24m in an area of debris near the stern. As we swam forwards, we passed a mast, the bridge and control tower, a 5.9" gun and windlasses. On our return along the port (shallower) edge of the deck we came across bollards and a final pair of 5.9" guns.