

GET WRECKED in Scapa Flow

By Robert Cooper

Photographs by Neil Bennett

If you have more than a passing interest in wrecks, you have probably heard of Scapa Flow in the Orkneys. You may have read about the scuttling of the German High Seas Fleet in 1919 and the subsequent salvage operation, or the appalling loss of life following the sinking of the *Royal Oak* in 1939 and the *HMS Hampshire* in 1916. These historic events have left their mark on this dramatic and windswept expanse of water.

On 21 June 1919, in the most significant act of naval sabotage the world has ever seen, the entire German Imperial Navy's High Seas Fleet was sent to the bottom of Scapa Flow to prevent it falling into the hands of the British. Of the 74 great warships deliberately sunk on that momentous day over 80 years ago, only eight of the original fleet remain on the seabed. They are the 26,000-tonne battleships *König*, *Markgraf* and *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, the 5,000-tonne light cruisers *Dresden*, *Brummer*, *Cöln* and *Karlsruhe*, and the 900-tonne destroyer *V83*. For this reason, Scapa Flow is a Mecca to wreck-diving enthusiasts today, and divers flock from around the world to explore these unique and historically significant wrecks.

UNPLEASANT DIVING?

To many sport divers, the mere mention of Scapa Flow conjures up images of technical divers preparing for deep dives using mixed gases, and undertaking long decompression stops in an inhospitable environment. Surely only an elite group of experienced divers possess the skills and experience necessary to dive the German fleet in Scapa Flow? In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The wrecks of Scapa Flow are accessible to most divers with any experience of UK waters.

However, the depth of the wrecks does mean a 'square dive' profile, so you might



Exiting the *Gobehrdor Bonus*



Structure now exposed on the *Markgraf*

want to think about some decompression stops. Breathing nitrox can usefully extend bottom times and add to your enjoyment. For example, a no-decompression air dive on the *Markgraf* would only permit a cursory glance at this awesome 26,000-tonne battleship. After little more than ten minutes of bottom time, it would be time to start thinking about your ascent.

THE JOHN I

We visited Orkney in September as the guests of Leigh and Dougie Caldwell at the Diving Cellar, which is based in Stromness. The Diving Cellar operates a six-day charter boat, the *John I*, between March and October.

The 65-foot *John I* is one of the largest dayboats operating in Scapa Flow. This steel-hulled former tug provides a stable platform, complete with a low freeboard, making water entry and exit a breeze. There is a large day cabin with a cooker, as well as a plentiful supply of hot drinks served throughout the day.

Arriving on the early evening ferry from Scrabster on Saturday, we were met at the Stromness ferry terminal by Dougie, who took us to the *John I* to stow our dive gear ready for the following morning's departure. After a meal in the Ferry Inn, we were glad to get to our beds, tired after our long drive. I slept well, but the sound of the howling wind throughout the night did little to reassure me about the week of diving which lay ahead – and my impending seasickness.

THE KARLSRUHE

The following morning we were aboard the *John I* by 8.30am and on our way to the *Karlsruhe*, the 5,000-tonne light cruiser lying in 26m of water just north of the island of Cava. A stiff southeasterly wind greeted us as we slipped out of Stromness harbour and I eyed the white crests on the waves in the distance, wondering whether my stomach would hold up to the punishment it was about to receive. A quick trip to the wheelhouse confirmed my worst fears as skipper Robert used the term "it's a bit lumpy" to describe the sea state.

Arriving at the *Karlsruhe* we kitted up and our skipper expertly manoeuvred the *John I* into position. A blast from the ship's horn was our signal to giant-stride into the water and allow the surface current to take us to the shotline. All the wrecks in the flow are buoyed with permanent shotlines, but I have to say my first impression of the shot to the *Karlsruhe* was that it was more like a lemonade bottle and a piece of string than what I'm used to!

Once under the water I was greeted with the dense green algae bloom not uncommon at this time of the year. However, after descending to about 15m,

the algae cleared and my torch quickly picked out the ghostly shape of the *Karlsruhe* lying on its starboard side.

The ship itself is relatively intact, despite countless salvage operations carried out over the years. The two bow-mounted 5.9-inch guns can be clearly seen, one of which has fallen away to the seabed, taking with it a large section of decking. The remaining stern and midship-mounted guns have been lost to the salvagers. Moving along her keel toward the stern, wreckage is strewn everywhere. About one-third of the ship has been blown apart, and only a collection of twisted metal now remains where the midship section once was.

The shallowest part of the wreck lies approximately 15m from the surface, making the *Karlsruhe* an ideal shakedown dive for new arrivals with a week of wreck-diving ahead of them. Ascending the skinny shotline, my thoughts turned to the awesome size of the battleships that we were due to dive later in the week. While the *Karlsruhe* seemed to be a big wreck to me, I remembered that the 30-metre beam of the 26,000-tonne *Markgraf* is twice that of the *Karlsruhe*!

On surfacing and signalling to the boat, I allowed myself to drit off the shot as Robert brought the boat around to pick me up. James, the deck hand, has perfected the art of assisting divers up the ladder, even in 'lumpy' seas, and after de-kitting and stowing away gear, a hot cup of tea was

dives were special in their own way, but any account of a trip to Orkney would not be complete without some mention of the attractions above the surface of Scapa Flow.

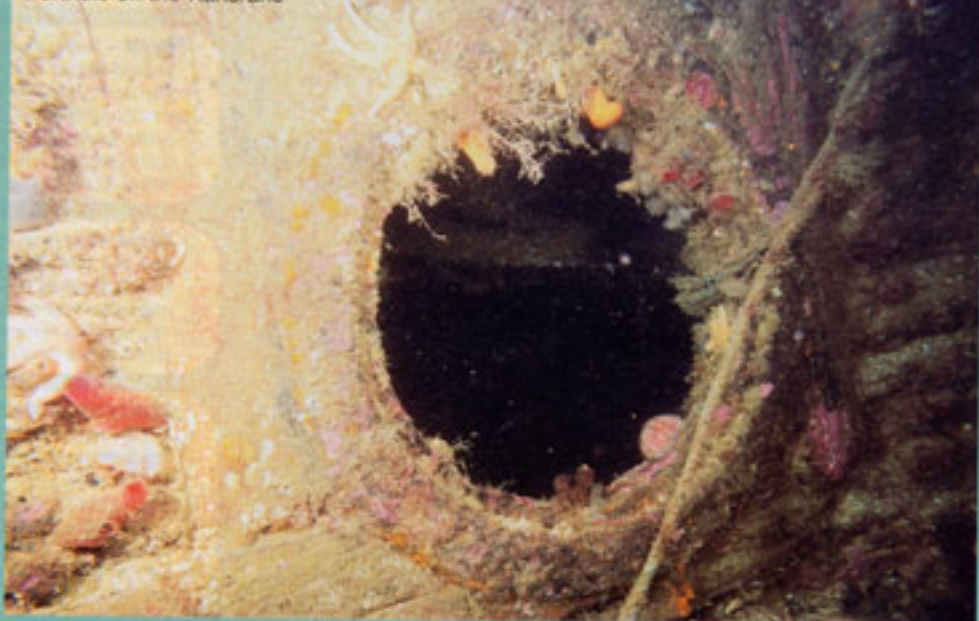
SURFACE INTERVAL

After our first dive in the morning, the *John I* took us ashore for a well-earned rest and some food and hot drinks. Most days we went ashore at Houton, Stromness or to the old naval base of Lyness on the island of Hoy. Lyness is home to the Scapa Flow Visitor Centre. This former pump house has been converted to provide a fascinating series of displays and exhibits.

Heading from the boat jetty, visitors are greeted by the sight of the 43-tonne bronze propeller and drive shaft salvaged from *HMS Hampshire*, the armoured cruiser on which Lord Kitchener perished in June 1916. Further exhibits include guns salvaged from the scuttled German High Seas fleet, torpedoes and military artefacts from both world wars. A comprehensive collection of photographs and an account of the sinking of the *Royal Oak* can be found inside.

The Royal Navy cemetery, a short walk from the visitor centre, serves as a poignant reminder of those who lost their lives during these wars. At the far end of the cemetery lie the graves of the nine German sailors who perished on the day the German fleet was scuttled, the headstone inscriptions bearing the date 21 June 1919.

Porthole on the *Karlsruhe*



thrust into my hand – a welcome sight after a memorable dive.

Over the next few days, we dived the cruisers *Brummer*, *Dresden* and *Cöln*, as well as the 26,000-tonne battleships *Markgraf* and *Kronprinz Wilhelm*. All these

THE TABARKA

In contrast to the battleships and cruisers found in Scapa Flow, there are the blockships, deliberately sunk in shallow water to prevent enemy vessels from entering the channel. A short distance from Stromness →

and between the islands of Burra and Hoy lies the *Tabarka*, a 2,600-tonne steamer seized in 1940 and taken to Scapa Flow. She was initially sunk in Kirk Sound, only to be salvaged and taken to Burra Sound to be re-sunk.

Diving the blockships requires a totally different approach. Due to the fierce currents experienced in this narrow channel – which can be up to 14 knots – there is no such luxury as a shotline! With divers kitted up and ready to go, skipper Robert sounded the ship's horn as our signal to enter the water. Normal safe-diving practice would have had me signalling an 'okay' to the boat, meeting up with my buddy,

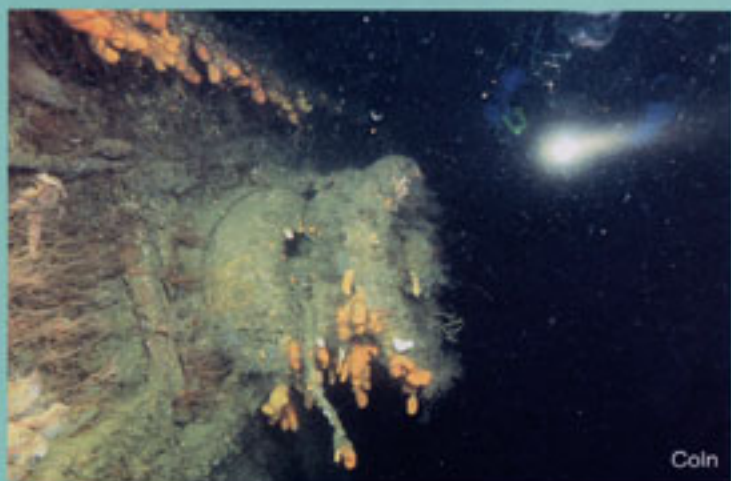


Breech of a gun from the *Coln*

composing myself ready for my descent and, after some orientation, checking my instruments before signalling to my buddy to descend.

But there was no time for these formalities. Instead we used a 'negative descent' entry, with every man for himself! This was because spending more than a few seconds in the strong surface current would have swept us off the wreck site. I found that by actually sucking air from the bladder of my BCD on the surface, I could be sure that when I hit the water I could breathe out, vent my drysuit and go straight down. That way I could be sure I didn't miss the wreck.

Once beneath the surface and after descending to a depth of about 10m, the upturned hull of the *Tabarka* came in to view. With a dozen



Coln

divers scrabbling to enter the wreck and keep out of the current, I was impressed with the etiquette displayed while queuing to enter the *Tabarka* through a narrow opening at the stern. Once inside, we were protected from the current and enjoyed a spectacular dive with 20-metre visibility.

This wreck is a photographer's dream, with heaps of natural light and abundant marine life. However, do take care when exiting the wreck, as my ascent from the *Tabarka* reminded me of what diving in a washing machine must be like!

The diving season in Scapa Flow generally runs from March, when the water is a chilly 6°C, right through to mid-October. Our visit in September was blessed with a 12°C water temperature and top-side weather ranging from a gale force eight southeasterly at the beginning of the week to a more pleasant force-four, and clear blue skies during the latter part of the week. The *John I* is a truly remarkable vessel, and my normal seasickness simply did not materialise during the week – despite the 'lumpy' conditions!



Coral life on the wrecks



Travel Information



How to get there – There are good connections by air from four major airports in Scotland, while land travel to Stromness on the mainland is facilitated by good roads, as well as bus and rail services, which tie in well with the ferry crossings to Scrabster.

By air – There are many route permutations and connecting services to Kirkwall Airport, but no Sunday flights. British Airways Express flies from Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Inverness, with connections from London (Heathrow), Birmingham and Manchester. Special air fares are available under the 'Highland Rover' promotion on domestic Scottish routes. In addition, British Airways Express also offers short 'Airbridge' flights from Wick to Kirkwall.

By car – The main road to the northeast of Scotland is the A9. Roads to Wick (for John O' Groats) and Thurso (for Scrabster) are well signposted, but allow plenty of time for your journey, as the scenery is spectacular – mainly for your passengers, though, as the road is very twisty at times! P&O Scottish Ferries operate the MV *St Ola* between Scrabster, on the Scottish mainland near Thurso, and Stromness in Orkney.

Dive centres/boats:

The Diving Cellar (MV John I)	01856 850055
The European Technical Dive Centre	01856 751269
MV Girl Mina	01856 850227
Scapa Flow Charters (MV Jean Elaine)	01856 850879
Scapa Scuba/Scapa Charters (MV Sharon Rose, MV Stormdrift)	01856 851218
Scapa Technical (MV Karin)	01856 874761
Sunrise Charters (MV Sunrise)	01856 874425
MV Halton	01856 851532



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