

In a remarkable season, on Wednesday, July 22, 2009, Jim Herbert of Osprey Charter took a group of divers to yet another new wreck. This is the third new wreck unveiled by Osprey this summer, and it is a prominent one – the sandsucker “Howard S. Gerken.” The ship was built during World War I, and because of a shortage of steel it was supposedly built as a composite vessel of both wood and metal. It was launched in 1918 as the Canadian freighter “T.P. Phelan” and served in the Great Lakes until 1926 when it was bought by an American company, converted to a 241’x41’ sandsucker, and re-named the “Gerken.” That same year on the night of August 20 the ship was traveling from Erie, PA, to Buffalo, NY, after completing some work at Presque Isle. A strong wind became even stronger, and as the wind increased, the ship tried to turn back to Erie. However, there was soon a strong gale blowing with large waves, heavy rain, and a pounding hail, disorienting the crew. The ship then began to founder in the storm. A distress radio call was sent, but to no avail. As a last-ditch effort, a kerosene-soaked mattress was set on fire on top of the deckhouse. This gained the attention of the railroad car ferry “Maitland.” At this point the 20 crew – including the ship’s namesake, Howard Gerken, who was aboard - launched the three lifeboats, which were tied to each other and the ship. The ship then suddenly rolled and sank, leaving the three lifeboats tied to the ship at the bottom in the storm. When the “Maitland” arrived, it started to collect the people aboard the lifeboats. Unfortunately, one of the lines broke and four people ended up in the water with one boat adrift. One person was rescued the next day barely alive by another ship, but the overturned lifeboat was found empty. The remaining three people had drowned, but Howard Gerken had survived the sinking of his own ship.

The “Gerken” was found several weeks prior to the dive by Capt. Jim Herbert and sidescan sonar expert Garry Kozak. A news reporter from the Buffalo press was along for the ride along with 14 divers, including Jack Papes, Sam Genco, Jimmy Herbert Jr., Chris Laughrey, Georgann & Mike Wachter, Cindy LaRosa, and Kevin Magee. The day was overcast and cool at 75 deg F, but the seas were acceptable at 2’. Upon arriving at the wreck site, Sam was the first diver in the water, and he attached a mooring to the wreck. Afterwards, everyone else entered. The ship lies completely upside down on the bottom with its stern pointing north. Strangely, the ship’s construction appears more like a barge than a ship, possibly as a result of its composite construction. The stern is square with a sloping taper up to the ship’s bottom. The bottom of the upturned hull itself is almost completely flat, but it has a prominent raised keel plate that runs along the centerline for the entire length of the ship. The sides are at 90 degrees to the flat bottom with only a very slight rounding between the two. Coming out of the sloping portion of the stern are the ship’s two propeller shafts, one on each side of the keel. Each shaft comes straight out of the sloping hull to a four-bladed propeller, and various struts support the shaft. Behind each propeller is a rudder. The entire style of construction is very plain and utilitarian, and the rudders / propellers form the main focus of the wreck.

It is a long swim along the length of the hull towards the bow, and at various points small mussel-encrusted stubs stick 1'-2' high out of the bottom of the hull. It is unknown whether these are pipes or something else, and their purpose is unknown. Their placement also does not form any obvious pattern. At one point amidships on the west (port) side is a small 1' diameter circular opening on the side of the ship that is near the bottom of an excavated hole several feet below the lake bottom. Peering inside just revealed a discharge pipe leading back as far as could be seen. Otherwise, there are no gaps or other obvious openings in the hull, and its entire length appears to be completely intact. This is somewhat unusual for a wood-planked wreck, but several divers reported scraping off the mussels to reveal wood planking. The bow is quite blunt and easily missed while swimming around the perimeter, further reinforcing the ship's barge-like construction style. The entire wreck only stands about 5'-10' high and appears to have buried itself deeply in the bottom, leaving no gunwales or gaps underneath exposed.

The wreck is at a very reasonable depth of 80', allowing lots of time to explore. Visibility was good at 30' with a warm 42-44 degree F bottom temperature, so some of the divers explored off the wreck to find any debris. The wreck is surrounded by a 1'-2' high clay wall about 30'-50' away from the wreck, and it appears there is a slight depression in which the ship rests. Georgann followed some cable off the east side of the stern, and this eventually led to a winch. Cindy and Kevin went on a heading of 255 degrees for about 150' off the west propeller, and they found what appears to be a large remnant of the dredge or sandsucker equipment. It is a large square-mouthed bucket about 10' wide with flat sides that taper down at the back and have several reinforcing ribs wrapping around the sides. The bucket points away from the wreck, and on each side lying on the bottom are arms made of steel trusses. These arms end about 30' away at a large square base made up of more steel trussing and wood planking.

Most divers spent 45-60 minutes exploring the wreck, and almost no deco was required. There was a thermocline at 50' with 70 deg F water above it and 10'-15' of visibility. The seas were beginning to build to 2'-3' with whitecaps after surfacing, and the boat returned to port after a very successful trip to this new wreck site!