

Alaska's Premiere Technical Dive: The S.S. *Aleutian*

By Steve Lloyd

The liner *Aleutian* was built in Philadelphia in 1898 as the SS *Havana*. The iron-hulled vessel was 375 feet (114 m) long with a 50-foot (15 m) beam. Operated by the New York and Cuba Steamship Company until 1905, the 5,708-ton ship was sold and renamed SS *Panama*, under which name she steamed the Atlantic route between New York and Panama for nearly 22 years.

In February 1927 the Alaska Steamship Company purchased the *Panama* and moved her to Pacific service. The new owners renamed the ship *Aleutian* after the string of volcanic islands that make up Alaska's southwest coastline, and gave her an extensive refit before placing the vessel on the northern route with regular freight, passenger and mail service between Seattle and Alaska.

On the morning of May 26, 1929 the *Aleutian* was carrying mail, 115 tons of freight, five passengers and 111 officers and crew as she steamed a course south into Uyak Bay on the northern coast of Kodiak Island. Sea conditions were calm and visibility was good. The *Aleutian* was making 14 knots and drafting 21 feet (6 m). Without warning, a tremendous shudder reverberated from the ship's hull far beneath the waterline. The *Aleutian* had struck a submerged pinnacle of rock lying unseen just beneath the icy water.

"I stopped the engines and then put her full ahead to beach her," Captain Gus Nord later testified. "She was sinking so fast that they told me from the engine room they could do nothing on account of the water coming. The vessel was sinking bow first with a heavy port list."

Mortally injured, the enormous ocean liner settled lower as thousands of tons of seawater rushed through the gash in her hull. The captain gave the order to abandon ship and the crew hastily lowered all available boats. Most of the passengers, officers and crew made it off the stricken *Aleutian* in lifeboats, but others leapt into the water and were plucked from the swirling maelstrom as the ship vanished.

Just seven short minutes after the collision, the *Aleutian* disappeared beneath the surface of Uyak Bay, a fuel oil slick and a mass of floating debris all that remained to mark her grave. An editorial printed the day after the wreck reads, "It seems to have been a case of too large a ship for too small a bay." The great ship, valued at \$1 million in pre-Depression American dollars, would lie hidden and forgotten for more than 73 years.

In 1998 I resurrected the story of the lost *Aleutian* while researching another Kodiak shipwreck story, the SS *Farallon* wreck of 1910. I visited the National Archives in Seattle and

obtained a copy of the transcript for the Marine Board of Inquiry hearing that had been conducted after the *Aleutian* sank in 1929. I learned that the steamer was reported to have sunk in very deep water—perhaps 300 feet (91 m) or greater—and that salvage had never been attempted.

A chart of Uyak Bay shows depths approaching 400 feet (122 m) near the reported site of the sinking, a depth I knew would place the wreck out of reach for all but the most experienced deep-wreck technical divers. From testimony given 70 years earlier by the *Aleutian*'s captain, pilot and first mate, I reconstructed the bearing, course and speed of the ship in the moments before she impacted the hidden pinnacle of rock. Using this information, In August 2002 I organized a search team that included Joshua Lewis, owner of the Kodiak-based research vessel *Melmar*, and dive buddies Bruce Lanham and Shane Brewster.

We used side-scan sonar and a magnetometer to search the seafloor in a large V-shaped grid beginning at the rock that had claimed the liner—now marked with a navigation aid and renamed Aleutian Rock in honor of its victim. Making calculations for the speed of the ship, the state of the tide on the morning she sunk, and a variety of other factors, we eventually located a very large target at just over 220 fsw (67 msw). It was the lost *Aleutian*.

I took the first dive, dressing in and following the descent line down into the icy darkness of Uyak Bay. At 80 fsw (24 msw), I caught a glimpse of an enormous cylindrical shape reaching to 110 fsw (34 msw), and then disappearing into the murk. It was the ghostly outline of one of the *Aleutian*'s masts, which seemed to glow white beneath the thick coating of metridium anemones that blanketed it.

We had only a few days remaining to explore the wreck before heading the *Melmar* back to Kodiak, a ten-hour run. Bruce and Shane were the next divers in the water, and found conditions as challenging as any dives they had ever done. Although the tops of the masts are shallower, the high point of the superstructure lies at 175 fsw (53 msw), the main deck at 190 fsw (58 msw), and the mud bottom at 220 fsw (67 msw). Heavy particulate in the nutrient-rich Alaskan seas filter almost all the ambient light in Uyak Bay below about 160 fsw (49 msw). The tidal exchange ranges from 12 to 20 feet (4 to 6 m), creating powerful currents that sweep the decks of the *Aleutian*. Over the years, the upper portion of the superstructure—originally containing the wheelhouse and officers' quarters—have collapsed into the passenger spaces below, creating a confusing tangle of doorways, beams, and twisted, rusting pieces of confusing wreckage that make navigating the forward section of the ship very difficult. The problem is compounded by visibility that is typically limited to 10-30 feet (3-10 m).

The experience of being the first divers on an intact, virgin passenger ship that has lain in deep water for more than 70 years is something we will never forget. Stacks of pristine china bearing the logo of the Alaska Steamship Co. lay stacked on the counters of the pantry. The telegraph and helm still stood in the wheelhouse, where the bridge telegraph rested in the mud. The ship's bell rested on deck at the bow, and another, smaller bell was still mounted outside the bridge. The tiled fireplace sits in the ship's opulent social hall, half-filled with silt,

home now to giant black rockfish that flourish on the wreck.

During the two years following the discovery, every dive we made to the *Aleutian* was done on open circuit air or trimix. That changed in July 2004 with the arrival of a team from the East Coast organized by Andrew Driver of Mad Dog Expeditions, based in New York City [www.MadDogExpeditions.com]. Making the grueling cross-country trip with Andrew were four experienced deep-wreck divers. Four of the five divers on the Mad Dog team planned to explore the *Aleutian* using closed-circuit rebreathers (CCRs). The long bottom times and relatively short decompression obligations afforded by the rebreathers would open a new chapter on deep wreck exploration in Alaska.

Kodiak Island lies 250 miles (402 km) southwest of Anchorage, which is Alaska's largest city. The town of Kodiak, on the southwest side of the island, was settled by Russian fur traders in the 1700s and remains the center of the island's population and commerce. There are no roads linking the villages and settlements on the island, so boats and small planes remain the only transportation link between these remote outposts and the rest of the world.

We base diving operations on the *Aleutian* out of an old salmon cannery on the western shore of Uyak Bay. The facility was built in 1934 and permanently closed 50 years later. Today, the weather-beaten buildings and creaking docks of the cannery lend an evocative touch to visiting divers' quest to explore a piece of Alaska's sunken history.

My partner Josh Lewis and I have established a technical diving outpost at Uyak Bay [www.DiveAleutian.com], offering full support for visiting technical divers. All equipment, supplies, food, helium, and other necessities are transported to the site by boat from Kodiak, or are flown across the mountainous island by seaplane in loads limited to 850 lbs (385 kg) each. The *Aleutian* rests 10 miles (16 km) back inside the sheltered waters of the bay, ensuring that the waters over the wreck are uniformly serene and calm during the summer season. Since the wreck lies just 1.5 miles (2.4 km) from the cannery dock, our twice-daily runs to the dive site are fast and comfortable.

Two years earlier, all our dives were confined to the forward section of the *Aleutian*, but we returned twice in 2003 and pushed our exploration aft to the ship's stern decks and compartments. We established two separate mooring lines on the wreck. We placed one on the forward lifeboat davit—starboard side—affording easy access to the bridge, the pantry, the first-class staterooms, the bow, and the forward two cargo compartments. The second line we shackled to a cross member on the main deck at the stern, allowing divers to drop over the fantail to the gigantic twin screws or explore the smoking room, barber shop, crew's quarters and staterooms, all situated aft.

After shaking off their jet lag and assembling their gear, the Mad Dog Expedition team was anxious to tackle an orientation dive on the wreck. Diving singly and in pairs, the East Coast wreck divers descended into the 44° F (7° C) water for their first glance at the

slumbering *Aleutian*. They spent their initial dives learning the lay of the wreck, memorizing major structural components, and making short reconnaissance trips into some of the many passages and deck openings. Soon everyone was feeling confident enough to begin making increasingly complex exploratory dives.

Although builder's plans for the *Aleutian* have not been located, we were able to find a partial set of plans for her sister ship, the S.S. *Yukon*, lost in 1946 on a voyage from Seward, Alaska to Seattle, Washington in service to the War Shipping Administration. We also found a detailed schematic of the *Aleutian*'s three public decks in a promotional Alaska Steam pamphlet published in 1927. Using these deck plans, Mad Dog team members began to plan increasingly complicated penetrations into the ship's lower decks.

My friend Shane Brewster, who located a meter-square opening in the ship's hull at 190 fsw (58 m), pioneered access to the *Aleutian*'s pantry in 2002. The opening on the starboard side was formerly a picture window in the ship's well-appointed passenger dining room. About 10 feet (3 meters) inside "Shane's Hole," a set of double doors opens from the dining room into the ship's pantry and adjacent galley. Thick layers of soft silt blanket the floor of these compartments. Silt covers the china, silver serving trays, and crystal salad dressing carafes still stacked on the counter. Overhead, a layer of black bunker fuel oil clings to the ceiling, where it has accumulated over generations, seeping from the tanks lying deep below. No matter how skilled or careful a diver is, exiting from the pantry requires him to turn and swim directly through a total silt-out, all the while taking care not to brush against the oil-covered overhead.

Mad Dog team member David Bressler studied the ship's layout carefully. Although every diver who had ever explored the pantry had entered and exited through Shane's Hole, on the plans it appeared there was a crew passage leading aft from the pantry and affording access to the officers' dining room, the engineers' quarters, and other working spaces of the ship. Others who had entered the pantry reported that this corridor was partially blocked with mounds of silt, and that no ambient light could be seen down its crumbling length. The plans show the passage extending almost half the ship's length, but with no discernable exit from the wreck except the pantry. Undeterred, David planned a dive that would take him deep inside the *Aleutian*'s unexplored interior, where no diver had ever been.

At the same time, Mad Dog team member Fabrice Pilato and I planned a dive to the *Aleutian*'s engine room. A preliminary dive aft of the ship's fallen single stack had revealed a cavernous rectangular compartment dropping like a rust-blanketed elevator shaft far beyond the reach of our powerful lights. Shielded from the tidal current, the water inside the compartment teemed with schools of black rockfish, with brightly striped tiger rockfish hiding shyly behind fallen wreckage. The dive was planned with me shooting video and Fabrice dropping down to look for the *Aleutian*'s massive steam engine that lay unseen, somewhere below 200 fsw (61 m).

David was in the water first. He dropped quickly down the forward mooring line and disappeared into Shane's Hole. Realizing that he may find no other exit from the crew passage, forcing him to make a long return through the pantry in zero visibility, he ran a

penetration line as he concentrated on avoiding the viscous, black goo pooled overhead.

Our two-man team descended a few minutes later, heading aft from the mooring point and pausing at the black abyss of the engine room compartment. My camera was equipped with 60 watt HID video lights, and I hovered above Fabrice as we dropped slowly down the shaft. We passed several metal catwalks, each deeply covered with slabs of rust that have flaked from the compartment's crumbling walls. We maneuvered carefully around an I-beam and lengths of pipe lodged across the compartment. Since I was diving open circuit trimix, I leveled off at 190 fsw (58 m) while Fabrice, diving a CCR, continued his descent.

Two decks below and unknown to us, David had pushed his way deep into the crew passage. Just aft of the pantry, he discovered that the interior partitions of the rooms that once lined this hallway have collapsed, presenting a much less constricted passage than he expected. (On a subsequent dive, he would find that the corridor reaches nearly to the *Aleutian's* stern, and that additional window openings in the hull permit relatively easy entry and exit points.) David paused at an interior doorway that opened on his right, toward the interior of the ship. He shone his light through the doorway, then followed by sticking his head through the opening.

At first, he could see nothing but blackness—no floor, no ceiling, and no shapes of any kind. But when he deflected his light, he could make out a faint green glow high above him. Hovering in the center of that dim rectangle of ambient light appeared the tiny speck of my distant camera lights. Looking down, he could see the dim shape of a yellow CCR unit one or two decks below as Fabrice searched for access to the engine space.

David had inadvertently located the access door from the engineers' quarters to the ship's mechanical space, and became the first diver to make the connection between Shane's Hole and the cavernous space of the engine room. Originally, this access door had opened onto a catwalk with stairs that reached down into the bowels of the *Aleutian's* engines and boilers. Over time, the catwalk has rusted and collapsed, leaving a door that opens into nothingness.

Because of our differing gear configurations and bottom profiles, each of us completed a solo ascent to the forward mooring line, meeting briefly at the surface-supplied oxygen deco station at 20 fsw (6 m). It wasn't until we surfaced and compared notes that we were able to determine, based on where each person had gone on the wreck, that a connection existed between the mechanical space and the pantry passageway.

Today, less than 20 people have dived and explored the *Aleutian*. Its decaying passages and collapsing superstructure beckon adventurers to seek out, investigate, and unravel the secrets still held by this grand old ocean liner resting deep beneath Alaska's seas.

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Steve Lloyd is the author of the book *Farallon: Shipwreck and Survival on the Alaska Shore* in addition to numerous articles on Alaska shipwrecks. He led a team that discovered the

Aleutian in 2002, and the following year found the Russian American Co. bark *Kad'yak*, lost in 1860 off Kodiak Island, the oldest shipwreck discovered in Alaska waters to date.