

# Once is Not Enough: Diving the Prins Willem V

Text and photos by Cal Kothrade

A short boat ride from Milwaukee's harbor, lies the most dived shipwreck in all of Lake Michigan, the Prins Willem V, or Willie as she is affectionately known to the locals. The wreck is visited by hundreds of divers each year, many of whom will do multiple dives on her throughout the six-month season.

The wreck's popularity is due to several factors. With considerable size, good depth, accessibility and a bizarre history, this wreck has it all. Her keel was laid by Dutch shipbuilding company Van Vlier Co. in Rotterdam in 1939, as a 258' steel hulled packet freighter, to be used for transporting goods between Europe and the Great Lakes region of the United States. Though, as a result of a collision with the towed barge Sinclair XII on a calm October evening in 1954, she will forever remain in Lake Michigan. The accident happened when crew aboard the Willem neglected to notice the towed barge, or the six hundred feet of cable that separated the tug Sinclair from its consort directly ahead of them as they left harbor on a return trip to Europe. After striking the tow cable, the barge swung around and rammed the Willem's starboard side, creating a eight foot tall by twenty foot long hole, between cargo bay no.2 and the engine room. Ninety minutes later, the Willie was on the bottom. The captains of both vessels were cited in the U.S. Coast Guard report as being at fault. The thirty people aboard were rescued without incident, and put up for the night at the nicely appointed Pfister Hotel, and all finger pointing aside, one of the best things to happen to divers in the Milwaukee area wound up resting on the bottom a mere three and one half miles due east of the harbor entrance.

At eighty-five feet to the sand, open water and advanced divers alike can enjoy generous bottom times allowing for circumnavigation of this sizable wreck. Upon descent, as the ship materializes out of the misty bottom the first thing one notices is the nearly seventy degree list to

starboard. Being almost fully over on her right side, she can be slightly disorienting, and even more so when making penetration dives into the easily accessible interior spaces.

A word of caution to would be explorers without the proper training, although nobody lost their lives during the sinking, several divers have died over the years due to various penetration associated issues. For divers who would rather not venture inside, many dives worth of exploration await on the outside. The ship's two cargo loading masts stand silent protruding from her weather decks, now hanging out over the serene Lake Michigan bottom. Other exterior features of interest include motors, winches, skylight windows, stairs, railings, davits and assorted items in the debris field.

The remains of a fifty six year old cargo no longer wanted, lies partially buried in the lake bottom as clay, sand and silt slowly invade the four gaping holes that once were capped by her twenty square foot hatch covers.

Fifty-five gallon drums remain scattered about like children's toys in an unkempt playroom, left behind from no less than three failed raising attempts. The wreck itself steadily carves its way deeper into the clay bottom with each passing year from the effects of water current and storm surge. The twelve foot diameter cast bronze propeller no longer occupies its perch in front of the rudder, nor will you find her anchors. The rest of the vessel though, remains intact, albeit cloaked in a skin of Quagga mussels, which oddly enough, are an invasive specie native to European waters, just like the Willie. Relatively safe penetrations/swim-throughs can be made between the two forward cargo bays and the two aft bays, allowing novice divers a chance to "get inside". Bring your dive lights though, as even with good daylight at eighty feet, the holds can get dark. More advanced wreck divers will enjoy discovering the many decks and spaces in this 258' playground.

Like all good shipwrecks, history plays an important role in the diving experience. With a past that reads like a Hollywood movie script, the Willie does not disappoint. This is not the first time she's been on the bottom. As the story goes, she was intentionally sunk in Rotterdam

harbor in 1943 while still under construction, as an impediment to the invading Nazis, in an attempt to blockade a crucial waterway. She remained there until the Van Vlier Company raised the hull after the war and resumed construction, finally completing the Prins Willem V in 1949. Milwaukee resident Scott Kuesel is an expert on all things "Willie", having himself been involved with one of the attempts to raise her off the bottom of Lake Michigan by Max Nohl shortly after the sinking. Kuesel has found a Dutch printed book that re-writes the story of her first sinking, instead attributing the intentional scuttling to the Germans, not the Dutch. Having captured the unfinished ship during the invasion, the German Navy intended to complete the vessel not as a freighter, but as a mini-sub mother ship/ support vessel. Four years later, with the ship not yet completed, the Germans found themselves retreating, and so intentionally sank the vessel in Rotterdam Harbor with the use of explosives, in an attempt to conceal the intended use as a mobile submarine base from the Allies.

#### Getting there:

Dive charter boat Len-Der runs several trips there each month. Be sure to check out Willie's cast bronze prop, which sits right there at the dock, before heading out. [www.len-der.com](http://www.len-der.com) or call Pirate's Cove Diving 414-482-1430 for reservations.

#### When to go:

The season runs May through early October, though water temps near the surface don't warm up until July. Vis will range from 15 to 80 feet, with a better chance for clear water in early or late season, but local weather and other factors can make it anybody's guess.

#### What to wear:

Water temps at depth vary between 38F and 60F with averages closer to 40F, making a dry-suit with dry-gloves a good idea. If you have a high cold tolerance, a full 7 or 8 mil wetsuit with hood, boots and gloves will get you through a single tank dive.