

USS *Massachusetts* Take an Underwater Tour Audio Transcripts

Stern and Rudder

Swimming along the collapsed plates of the orlop deck in the after end of the ship, we can see that the stern has slowly sunk into the sandy seabed over the years. When *Massachusetts* first arrived in Pensacola the vessel was to be sunk prior to bombardment. Lt. Arthur Forster, the master mechanic of the structural and hull division for the U.S. Navy was given the job to sink the battleship. He chose to open all of the sea valves and to allow the Gulf water to flood the ship, but it was discovered that the ship did not sink enough. Once again, Lt. Forster was sent out to the *Massachusetts*, this time to refloat her. After weeks of hard work and bad weather the ship was refloated and the condemned *Massachusetts* was taken to another area just west of the Pensacola pass where she now lies today. We now come upon the massive head of the rudder shaft that turn the ship with a series of gears and cables from the wheelhouse. Directly behind the rudder head is the top of the rudder itself, which is mostly buried in the sand. Only the rudder frame survives, the thin steel plates of the rudder have disappeared.

Western Turret

With the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, *Massachusetts* was called in to battle. She made a mad dash with the Flying Squadron for Cuba to help blockade San Fuegos and Santiago. On the 31st of May, America's second battleship saw her first combat. Along with Iowa and New Orleans she fired at batteries in *Cristobal Colon*. *Massachusetts* actually missed the Battle of Santiago Bay a few days later. She had been sent to Guantanamo Bay for refueling. She did not stay out of the action for long. On July 4th, 1898 she helped sink the Spanish cruiser Rellena Mercedes. Following this heroic duty she went to Guanica, Puerto Rico to help with troop transportation during occupation of the island. Approaching turret #2 we can see the gun port of one of the two 13" guns that were housed inside. One disadvantage of the two center-lined heavy gun turrets was discovered when both batteries were trained outboard together at the same time. Due to the weight of the combined guns the ship tended to heel over on that side, exposing the hull area below the armor belt along the other side. An attempt to remedy this was made by adding massive led weights inside the back of each turret.

Mid Ship

The 8" secondary guns were housed in four raised turrets mounted in the mid ship section to form a citadel protecting the ship and its men and machinery. Together with four torpedo tubes and a host of small arms the battleships combined firepower was a force to reckoned with. In the center hull between the two great turrets lie the broken 8" gun turret assemblies. Armored tubes that fed ammunition to the guns as well as gears that turn the turrets are now homes for puffer fish, sea cucumbers, arrow crabs and moray eels. Inside one of these turrets an accidental explosion took place in 1903 while *Massachusetts* was conducting artillery practice off the island of Calibra. The premature detonation of one of the 8" guns took the lives of nine sailors and caused the Navy's ordnance manuals to be rewritten. Continuing our tour aft along the port side of the battleship we come along a breach in the mid ships hull that has exposed a segment of armor belting fastened along the waterline to protect against enemy torpedo attacks. In addition to side and deck armor plates, this 18" thick belt made of a specially patented nickel steel was

bolted to the hull with a cushion of cork bedding to absorb impact concussions. When at anchor, the ships crews also deployed special netting around the ship that was designed to catch underwater projectiles.

Eastern Turret

The 350 foot long battleship was armed with two heavy 13” gun batteries and 4 8” secondary batteries as well as smaller ordnance. The larger guns were housed in two turrets, one mounted forward and the other mounted aft along the ships center line as opposed to an offset design. This new feature limited the warships field of fire but gave additional stability to the hull. Swimming along turret #1 we can see that the revolving turret has become displaced from its barbet, or mount and tilts toward the center of the ship. All around the turret thousands of cigar minnows rapidly dart from place to place creating halos of shining movement.

Bow

Come with us to visit the oldest existing American battleship USS *Massachusetts*, a remarkable relic of Naval Technology that was scuttled in 1921 outside the entrance to Pensacola Bay. Awash in emerald green water and partially buried in a white sandy bottom the old ship has spent more than eighty of her one hundred years as a giant artificial reef. She has become part of the underwater environment serving as a unique aquatic and archaeological preserve. Our excursion begins at the gracefully curving bow where flounder hide beneath the skeleton of the forward torpedo tube. *Massachusetts* and her sister ships *Indiana* and *Oregon* were the heavy caliber, heavy armor battleships to be built by the United States and the first to be given hull numbers. Today the hulls holes that deployed large anchor chains are home to white anemones and long purple sea fans. Nearby the remains of the starboard boat crane protrude from the bow. On the forward deck the windlass house covered with soft white sponges has been displaced by artillery testing. Behind is the windlass assembly of four massive steam-driven gears that once retracted the ships bower anchors. As a coastal defense battleship, *Massachusetts* drew 24 feet of water and was propelled at a maximum of 15 knots by vertical triple expansion steam engines. These 10,000 horsepower engines also drove the powerful windlass, hoisting anchors and their chains from the water to allow the ship to get underway.

Fighting Tops

As we continue swimming forward together with the spade fish along the starboard side of the battleship we can see that the main deck and its armor plates and belt are relatively intact since this side of the ship was away from the land-based artillery that used her as a target. More than 100 rounds of fire were directed at *Massachusetts* from railroad-mounted cannons. Scarred and torn, the ship sat peacefully afterward in the Gulf, attracting fish and fishermen alike until 1956 when several scrap companies joined forces to salvage the wreck. Amidst opposition to this idea from the people of Pensacola the state filed an injunction to prevent scrapping activities and the Supreme Court awarded the state and its citizens title to *Massachusetts*. Here we come across a segment of the battleships fighting tops that rose above the pilot house on the foremast high above the vessel’s smokestacks. Similar to a crows nest of a sailing ship the tops consisted of two observation platforms where lookouts were stationed to report sightings of navigational hazards or enemy ships. They also served to help direct the ship’s firepower by relaying directions to the gunnery officers inside the turrets. At last we return to the bow of *Massachusetts* where we began this underwater tour. In reality the old battleship is no less

majestic today then when she was commissioned more than 100 years ago. Her role has changed from a home and defender of men to a home and refuge for marine life. Many people who visit *Massachusetts* to fish and dive among the decks and armament of a bygone era may be surprised to learn of her illustrious naval career and her role in transforming her nation into a major sea power. Today she still reflects that military technology but she also represents an ecological wonder as a living museum in the sea. We hope you enjoyed your tour.