U-boats were the most serious threat to shipping in the English Channel and the Western Approaches during the war. They could easily negotiate the Dover Straits without being detected and take merchant and naval vessels unawares.

For years, the Admiralty had advised against the use of convoys, arguing that gathering merchant vessels together would make it easier for U-boats to sink them in large numbers. In fact, solitary ships were easier to intercept and attack than large groups and convoys were extremely successful at protecting merchant ships from U-boats.

Indian City, Headlands and Andalusian

In early 1915, submarine warfare was conducted according to international rules of war and a 'gentlemans' code of conduct.

Loss

On the 10th March 1915, the U-boat SM U-29 stopped the Indian City, a brand new British cargo steamer 10 miles south of the island of Scilly. After warning the vessel to stop, the submarine commander gave the crew 20 minutes to abandon ship before torpedoing it. The crew of Indian City had taken to their lifeboats and U-29 towed them towards land. U-29’s commander even invited Indian City’s captain on board the U-boat for a glass of wine, which he accepted.

As they approached land the submarine left the crew and headed in the direction of another steamer. The captain of the Headlands was too willing to surrender his vessel and turned away from the U-boat at full speed but to no avail and the U-boat came alongside. The commander gave the crew only 5 minutes to abandon ship before bringing the vessel to a halt.

A few hours later a third steamer was sighted by U-29 and after a warning shot the crew were given 15 minutes to escape. The U-boat crew attempted to scuttle the vessel and after a warning shot the crew were given 15 minutes to abandon ship before firing a torpedo into its hull.

Both Indian City and Headlands sank in the bay but the Andalusian drifted out of sight and it was some time before her loss was confirmed.

SM U-29

The commander of U-29 was Otto Weddigen, who had revolutionised submarine warfare in 1914 when in command of U-9 he sank three Home Fleet cruisers in just over an hour. After sinking the Headlands he took U-29 north and entered Scotland but on the 18th March the U-boat was rammed by HMS Dreadnought and Weddigen and his entire crew were lost.

The Wreck Sites

The likely remains of the Indian City and Headlands have been identified in 100m of water south of the island of Scilly. The Andalusian, which sank out of sight, is believed to be the identity of a wreck to the west of the islands.

SM U-103

In May 1918, the hunter became the hunted when kapitänleutnant Claus Rücker of U-103 prepared to attack the ocean liner SS Olympic. Convoy

Olympic, sister ship to the ill-fated Titanic, was requisitioned by the Admiralty for war work in 1915. In May 1918, with an escort of American destroyers, Olympic was heading for France carrying 9,300 American troops. South of Cornwall, a number of U-boats lay in wait, hoping to intercept the fast convoys coming into the English Channel.

Loss

In the early hours of the 12th May (U-103’s lookouts spotted the liner, but the submarine was approached and turned his ship towards the U-boat at ramming speed. Guns on Olympic opened fire and Captain Bertram Hayes turned his ship towards the U-boat at ramming speed. Olympic dodged but the U-boat ran into its own wake causing it to sink stern first to a depth of 50m.

The Wreck Site

Today the wreck of U-103 lies in 60m of water approximately 50 miles south of Cornwall. It is a fascinating wreck and divers can reach it in three hours but it is a long way from the shore.