Submarines were the greatest hazard to shipping in the English Channel during the First World War. In 1915 and again in 1916, Germany attempted anti-commerce offensives to restrict merchant trade. In 1917 they commenced their most serious effort with a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, meaning any ship was at risk of attack.

The Sussex coast, within easy reach of the Flanders Flotilla based in Bruges, proved to be an ideal hunting ground for U-boats. In 1917 and early 1918, ships were sunk on an almost daily basis.

SS Tycho and Porthkerry

The dangers of lingering in an area known to contain U-boats, even when on a mercy mission, were graphically illustrated in May 1917.

The sinking of the Tycho and Porthkerry is a conspicuous instance of German callousness. The U-boat commander waited until the Tycho’s boats were alongside the Porthkerry before discharging his second torpedo, and thereby killed 15 men without the slightest excuse or necessity. He could have torpedoed the Porthkerry before those lifeboats were alongside, but apparently he preferred that her sinking should be accompanied by loss of life. There seems to be no other explanation of his conduct.

SS Moldavia

A former P&O liner pressed into war service, this steamship’s loss led to the first casualties amongst the United States’ 4th Infantry Division.

Convoys

SS Moldavia was a British passenger steamer owned by the P&O Steam Navigation Company. After she was launched in 1903, she spent most of her time travelling between England and Australia via the Suez Canal. One of the ship’s notable features was the 1,000 portholes lining her sides.

In March 1918, Moldavia was purchased by the Admiralty and converted into an armed merchant cruiser. Approximately 70 passenger steamships were modified in this way during the war; the Royal Navy used vessels from the P&O, Cunard and White Star Lines.

Moldavia was on a voyage from Cardiff to Sheerness with a cargo of coal, and was the U-boat’s target. Two torpedoes were launched from the same submarine (UB-40) that had sunk Tycho. The torpedoes struck in the boiler rooms killing the Master, the Chief Officer and 22 of her crew as well as 15 of the crew from Tycho – including her Master – who were still alongside in their lifeboats. The Porthkerry sank in 7 minutes.

In the early evening of 20th May 1917, whilst south of Shoreham-by-Sea, Tycho was torpedoed by the German submarine U-32 commanded by Hans Howaldt. The torpedo hit abreast of No. 2 hatch and the ship immediately began to sink. There were no casualties at this point and the crew abandoned ship into the lifeboats. The Tycho sank within half an hour; the Master having destroyed confidential papers.

SS Tycho

In May 1917 the SS Tycho was nearing the end of a voyage from Bombay to Hull with 7,200 tons of general cargo. Hull was the vessel’s home port and some of her crew of 33 would remain there.

In defiance of Admiralty instructions, Tycho proceeded to the vicinity of Tycho to recover survivors and Tycho boat came alongside her. As the survivors began to board the Porthkerry, the reason behind the Admiralty instruction not to linger in the area of a U-boat became instantly clear. Porthkerry was hit by a torpedo fired from the same submarine (UB-40) that had sunk Tycho. The torpedo struck in the boiler rooms killing the Master, the Chief Officer and 5 of her crew as well as 15 of the crew from Tycho – including her Master – who were still alongside in their lifeboats. The Porthkerry sank in 7 minutes.

All of the casualties (total of 22) occurred as or near the Porthkerry. The survivors, 18 from Tycho and 12 from Porthkerry, were picked up by another nearby ship, the SS Esperanto before being transferred to the tug Mercedes III and landed at Newhaven. Some of the casualties are buried at Rottingdean, Sussex.

The Wrecks

The wrecks lie close together about 1 mile south of Dungeness-by-Sea. Porthkerry lies in 40 feet of water. Tycho lies in 45 feet of water. Neither wreck has any forms of protection.

SS Moldavia

The dangers of lingering in an area known to contain U-boats, even when on a mercy mission, were graphically illustrated in May 1917.