

FORGOTTEN WRECKS

DEVON

The English Channel saw all manner of different craft in its waters during the First World War. Some of these, such as fishing boats and colliers, continued the work they had been doing for years in peacetime. Others were unique to the war and reflected the mounting losses on the Western Front.

By 1917 no vessel was safe from the U-boats, no matter what its purpose or nationality and an extensive range of different tactics were employed to protect ships, including the use of planes and airships.

HMHS *Asturias*

HMHS *Asturias* was one of thirteen allied hospital ships sunk or damaged between 1915 and 1918 as a result of enemy action.



Loss

HMHS *Asturias* was requisitioned from the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company in August 1914 and became one of the largest cross-channel hospital ships.

On the night of 20th March 1917, *Asturias* was returning to Southampton after discharging patients at Avonmouth. She was painted in hospital colours, distinguished by two wide green painted stripes interrupted by two red crosses and a huge red cross amidships, all illuminated by bright lights, as well as the ship's navigation lights. As a hospital ship she should have been safe from attack, but that night German U-boat *UC-66*, a special type of submarine equipped with mines as well as torpedoes, struck without warning.

One (or possibly two) torpedoes struck the ship's starboard side, destroying one of the propellers and the rudder, as well as flooding the engine room. An attempt to launch the lifeboats reaped tragic results. As the boat was lowered with about twenty-six people on board, it tipped and threw three men into the water, crushing them between the boat and the sinking vessel. Then, as the lifeboat was about to push off, it capsized, throwing all passengers into the dark, freezing waters.

Once rescued, survivors were cared for by the people of Devon, who donated blankets and warm clothing and treated the more minor injuries. Not only humans were saved from the foundering hospital ship. According to *The Western Times*, one crew member salvaged two cages of canaries and another rescued a grey Persian kitten under his coat.

Fate

Asturias had beached beneath the cliff on Great Eelstone Rock. In the following days, the Secretary of the Admiralty announced that 11 military personnel had been lost along with 20 members of the crew. An additional 11 of those on board were still unaccounted for, including one female staff nurse and a stewardess.

Asturias's war role had not ended, however, as the ship was successfully re-floated and towed to Portsmouth, where the Admiralty used her as an ammunition hulk. After the war, *Asturias* was refitted and re-launched as *Arcadian* and sailed on for a further ten years, taking passengers on luxurious Mediterranean and Scandinavian cruises.

With thanks to volunteer Kathryn Beresford for her research and writing.

Above Left: *Asturias* in her hospital ship colours. Despite being very obviously a hospital ship, she was torpedoed without warning.

Left: *Asturias* beached on Great Eelstone Rock. Painting reproduced with the permission of Mike Greaves ASGFA (@greaves2connections.com).

SSZ 15

The Forgotten Wrecks are not all ships and boats. Airships and aircraft of various types were essential to the anti-submarine effort of the First World War.

Airships offered a range of advantages over aircraft, including increased flight time, the ability to fly in low cloud and fog, and the option to hover slowly to search below. Visibility from an airship was excellent; they could fly both high and low and there were no wings to obscure the view. If an engine should fail, they could remain airborne while the problem was addressed. Disadvantages included a slow speed (40 – 55 mph), vulnerability to enemy aircraft, the need for light winds plus significant infrastructure requirements at base, including hydrogen and hangars.

SSZ 15 was a Submarine Scout Zero class, non-rigid airship. It had a boat-shaped car made of an ash frame covered in plywood. This was slung beneath a large bullet-shaped hydrogen-filled balloon (or envelope) of nearly 2,000 cubic metres (70,000 cubic feet) capacity. The envelope, typically made from layers of cotton fabric proofed with rubber, was approximately 44 metres (143ft) long with a diameter of 9 metres (30ft). The SSZ airships had a crew of 3; the pilot sat in the middle and the engineer sat behind him. At the front of the car, the wireless operator manned a machine gun. 77 airships of this type were built to carry out coastal patrols from stations along the south coast.

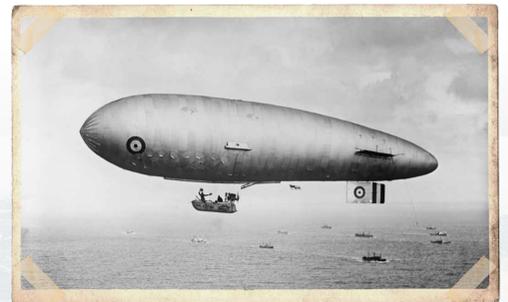
Loss

On the morning of 13th April 1918, SSZ 15 set out from Bridport in Dorset. The pilot, lieutenant G R J Parkinson, was accompanied by Air Mechanics R T James (engineer) and V H Hudson (wireless operator). At approximately 9.45pm, after the airship had been in the air for almost 15 hours, SSZ 15 was seen landing on the sea two miles south of Exmouth, probably as a result of engine failure. Rescue boats were sent out but on arriving at the airship the crew were nowhere to be found. They were officially reported as missing, presumed drowned.

The Zero control car was designed to float on water and the crew were equipped with life jackets. However, historic records show that other airships were recalled that afternoon due to rising winds and decreasing visibility, so it is possible that poor weather contributed to the crew's loss. Parkinson's body later washed up at Exmouth and James's body was found at Berry Head, near Brixham. Hudson was never found.

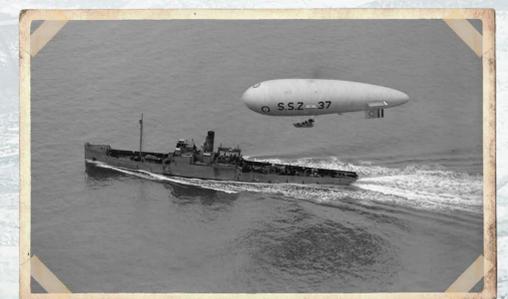
SSZ 15 was listed as 'Lost at Sea', so we can presume that it sank but its remains have not been found to date.

The Maritime Archaeology Trust is indebted to Brian Turpin, airship historian, for generously sharing his extensive knowledge on airships.



Above: A Submarine Scout Zero class airship patrols over merchant shipping. © IWM (Q 20643).

Below: SSZ 37 flies above a minelaying sloop. Airships were ideal escort craft and could even be launched and recovered from ships at sea. © IWM (Q 48005).



Background Image: Claus Bergen 1918



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