Submarines were not the only threat to shipping during the war: minefields were equally deadly and everyday peacetime hazards of the sea continued in wartime. Some ships were lost to accident, sometimes as a direct result of the procedures put in place to protect them.

Sometimes the hunter became the hunted and U-boats also litter the seabed in this area. Some fell foul of their own weapons whilst others were relentlessly hunted by the Royal Navy.

SS War Knight
This merchant steamer sank with horrific loss of life after a catalogue of accidents and misfortune.

Convoys
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. Instead vessels travelled independently, hoping to avoid detection. By 1917, this was obviously not working. Losses were soaring and convoys were introduced. Grouping ships together had the benefit of allowing close escort by Royal Navy warships. However, so many ships in close proximity increased the risk of accidents and in March 1918 it resulted in catastrophe for the SS War Knight.

Loss
War Knight was one of 16 merchant ships in an escorted convoy that was approaching the Isle of Wight on 24th March 1918. The convoy was sent to other routes, but only some vessels received the instructions. As ships crossed paths, War Knight struck the tanker O B Jennings. The tanker’s cargo of flammable naptha poured over the deck of War Knight and ignited, killing nearly everyone on board. Fewer than ten men, protected below decks, survived the inferno, their reports make harrowing reading.

The following day, the still burning wreck was accidentally towed through a minefield and severely damaged by three mines. It was then towed to Freshwater near the Needles, where it was sunk by gunfire to extinguish the flames.

Legacy
Forty-five years later, bales of raw rubber from the War Knight’s cargo washed up in Freshwater Bay and beachcombers received £4 per bale in salvage money. Some of the War Knight’s crew received posthumous medals for bravery, but only three are recognised on naval memorials on the south coast.

SM UB-81
A combination of tragic events resulted in the loss of the brand new coastal U-boat SM UB-81 and 29 of its crew in December 1917.

Loss
On 2nd December 1917, SM UB-81 was patrolling south of the Isle of Wight when it hit a mine and sank. The rear of the submarine was badly damaged but by pumping air into the forward tanks the crew managed to get the bow of the vessel clear of the water. By removing a loaded torpedo, several men were able to crawl up the torpedo tube and escape. Conditions outside were so unpleasant that several of the crew returned inside saying they would rather die below than freeze outside. The Royal Navy patrol vessel HMS P32 came alongside to assist, but hit the bow of the U-boat. Water poured into the torpedo tube and the submarine sank, drowning the remaining men on board.

Controversy
Historic sources paint different pictures of the loss. Although the log book of HMS P32 makes no mention of the collision, German survivors repeatedly suggest the patrol boat rammed the U-boat. The Wreck Site
Today the remains of SM UB-81 lie near 35m of water south of Portsmouth. It is designated as a Controlled Site under the Protection of Military Remains Act - making it illegal to dive on the site.

SM UB-81: A combination of tragic events resulted in the loss of the brand new coastal U-boat SM UB-81 and 29 of its crew in December 1917.

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