

# FORGOTTEN WRECKS

## HAMPSHIRE AND ISLE OF WIGHT

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 ordered to alter course, 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 naphtha poured over the decks 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. War Knight's loss was considered a marine risk rather than a war risk, so the contribution and sacrifice made by the majority of the ship's crew is not formally recognised.



Above: a Royal Navy convoy, like the one War Knight was part of, zig-zags through a danger zone in the Atlantic Ocean during the First World War. © IWM (Q 19954)

### 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 suggests the patrol boat rammed the U-boat.

#### The Wreck Site

Today the remains of SM UB-81 lie in nearly 30m 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.

The Maritime Archaeology Trust is indebted to Dave Wendes of Wight Spirit Charters who has generously shared decades of his research into the wrecks off Hampshire and the Isle of Wight with the Forgotten Wrecks project.

A number of sources have been consulted to find out more about the loss of SM UB-81.

10.16	a/c S74E to investigate Rockets seen SSE from Culver.
10.45	Picked up 2 officers & 5 men (one man died) from mined German submarine S.M. 'U.B.81. Survivors placed under arrest & isolated. Papers & personal property examined & handed over to C in C on arrival in harbour.

The log book of HMS P32. Transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 53/56393.

**Details of the Sinking**

Both officers stated that after losing the anchor the boat had steered very badly. They thought it was possible that they might have had a certain amount of cable in tow which might have fouled some mine moorings and eventually caused the mine to explode. In any case it seems improbable that the mine exploded in contact with the submarine, as the actual damage caused was only slight.

According to the narrative of the survivors, the submarine was at a depth of about 20 metres (62 ft.) when a dull explosion was heard aft. Immediately after, two men came running forward with the report that water was entering the stern compartment. The watertight doors were immediately closed; but the force of the explosion had sprung a number of rivets and water was beginning to enter the second compartment. Owing to the sudden ingress of water, the air pressure became enormous and breathing was rendered very difficult. Some idea of this may be gathered from the experience of Able Seaman Blunck, who out of curiosity took his pulse, counting 227 beats to the minute. An attempt was made to rise to the surface; but this was found to be impossible, as the submarine had lost her trim, and the after tanks, which had been damaged by the explosion, could not be blown. By this time the situation of the crew became one of extreme discomfort, for the vessel had lost her trim to an extent of about 55°.

As the stern of 'U.B. 81' was resting on the bottom in a depth of about 28 metres (15.3 fms), the Captain proposed that an attempt should be made to escape through the forward tubes. Some time was spent in discussion and preparation, and eventually, after a torpedo from the upper starboard tube had been withdrawn and rendered harmless, three men were pushed into the tube. A box was introduced behind the last man to act as support and to afford bearing surface. The sea cap was then cautiously opened, and when it was found that the mouth of the tube was well over a foot above the level of the water, the men in the interior of the boat, by bearing against the box, ramsed the human load through.

Survivor interrogation reports compiled by the Admiralty. Transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 137/4126.

London,  
13 December, 1917.

My Dear Parents,

Well, your youngest son can now await the end of the war in safety. As you have probably already heard, I am one of the 6 survivors of the beautiful 'B. 81', which met her fate on her very first voyage. No-one who went through that time will forget it. It is incredible, inconceivable, that we six survivors should have had such extraordinary luck.

I will try, however, to describe the events of those hours - always supposing, of course, that the English Censor has no objection. I trust that it is not against the rules of English Censorship.

A letter from Able Seaman Blunck to his parents. Transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 137/4126.

Background Image: Claus Bergen 1918



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