After submarines, mines presented the greatest danger to shipping in the English Channel. German U-boats slipped through the Dover Straits to lay mines in shipping lanes, and many merchant vessels and warships were lost to these underwater explosives.

In the early years of the war, before the invention of the depth charge, mines were also the Royal Navy's best weapon to use against U-boats. The Dover Straits were blocked by mines and minefields were often laid in areas that U-boats were known to patrol, in the hope that they might score a lucky success.

**HMS Ariadne**

An obsolete cruiser, Ariadne found new work as a minelayer. Her cargo may well still be a hazard on the seabed.

**Convoys**

The rapid development of ship design and technology meant that when HMS Ariadne, a Diadem class Protected Cruiser, was launched in 1898, she was essentially already obsolete. After being converted to a stoker training vessel in 1913, she was given a new role during the war as a minelayer. After being converted in March 1917, Ariadne worked on the Dover Barrage, a chain of nets, mines and patrols that stretched across the Dover Straits.

**Loss**

On 26th July 1917, while steaming down the English Channel to Portsmouth with some 400 mines, Ariadne was sighted by Commander Otto Steinbrinck of UC-65. The U-boat fired a single torpedo that struck Ariadne on the port side amidships. The cruiser did not sink immediately and the commanding officer, Captain Harry Hesketh Smyth RN, prepared for the ship to be taken in tow by her destroyer escort. However, 50 minutes later whilst the escorts were alongside, another torpedo slammed into the ship, which quickly caused it to heel over and sink. The survivors (including the Captain-Hesketh Smyth) were picked up by nearby vessels, but 38 officers and crew were lost.

**The Wreck Site**

After the war, the wreck of HMS Ariadne was the subject of a number of salvage efforts. These were generally based on the use of explosives to break up the wreck and recover the metal. The wreck today, therefore, is very dispersed, comprising clusters of debris, some of which are likely to contain unexploded mines from the ship's cargo.

**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 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.