

FORGOTTEN WRECKS

KENT

The Dover Strait was an important area of water during the war, combining as it did the shortest crossing between Britain and the front line of the Western Front with the dangers of being the nearest piece of coast to the German U-boat bases in Belgium.

U-boats began to pass through the strait only a few weeks in to the war and for years were able to outwit the Royal Navy and wreak havoc in the narrow waterway. A few years later the tide had turned, however, and few U-boat crews took the risk of passing through the strait and survived to tell the tale.

SS Lusitania

The loss of RMS *Lusitania*, the British ocean liner torpedoed off the southern coast of Ireland on 7th May 1915 is perhaps one of the better known incidents of the First World War at sea.

In fact, this was not the only ship of that name to be lost during the conflict. The less well known SS *Lusitania* was sunk off Folkestone, Kent some six months after its more famous namesake.

The Final Voyage

A British merchant ship, SS *Lusitania* was built in 1903 in Blyth, Northumberland. On 17th November 1915 the vessel was travelling from London to Cadiz with a general cargo when it became another victim of the underwater minefields laid by German U-boats off Kent.

This *Lusitania*'s story is inextricably linked with that of HMHS *Anglia*, a hospital ship carrying nearly 400 wounded from Boulogne to Dover when it struck a mine and sank, in just 15 minutes, near Folkstone Gate off Kent.

Anglia was the first hospital ship casualty of the war; more than 200 of the wounded on board were cot cases, strapped into beds on the lower decks. Vessels in the area quickly went to the aid of the *Anglia* and one of those was the SS *Lusitania*, lowering two rescue boats into the water and picking up survivors before also hitting a mine and sinking.

All of *Lusitania*'s crew (approximately 25) survived, including 14 year old Assistant Steward Herbert Scott who was the last to leave the stricken ship.

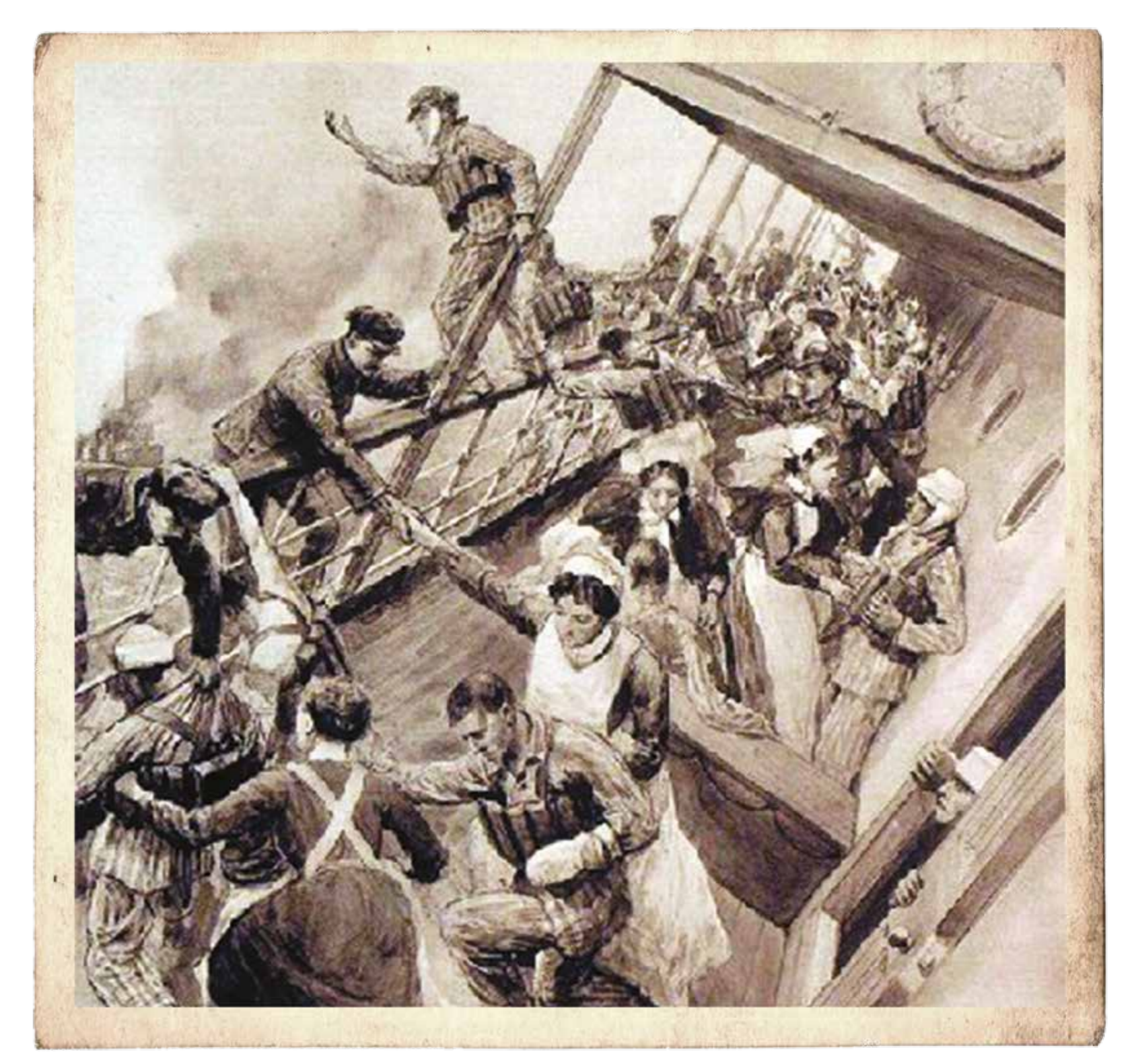
Approximately 300 people were rescued from the *Anglia*, with the tragic loss of more than 160 lives, including 10 medical staff and 25 crew, all from Holyhead.

The Wreck Site

Today, the remains of both ships lie at a depth of approximately 30 metres within a few miles of Folkestone, Kent. They are not protected and many artefacts have been taken from them by sport divers over the years. Recent calls for the *Anglia* to be protected by legislation are currently being considered by the Ministry of Defence and Historic England.

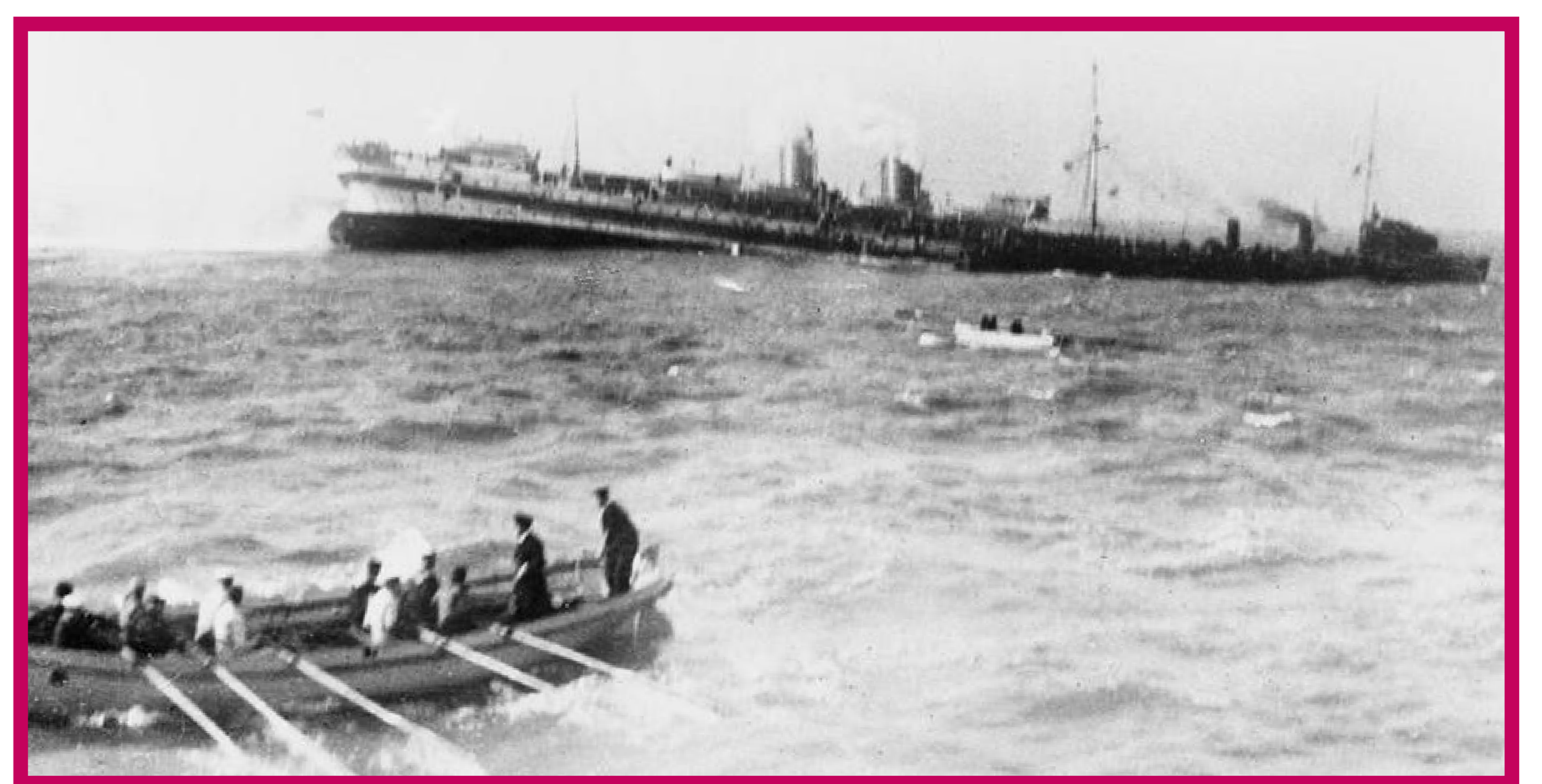


Left: Herbert Scott, photographed three days after the sinking. Originally published in the *Daily Sketch*, 20th November, 1915.



Right: Escaping the Sinking Ship. Originally published in the *Illustrated London News* 27th November 1915.

Below: Rescue vessels manoeuvre around the sinking *Anglia*. © IWM (Q 22867)



SM UB-31

After a successful career, this U-boat was lost in a graphic demonstration of the Royal Navy's new anti-submarine technology. Or was it?

Loss

On May 2nd 1918, after successfully sinking a ship in the English Channel, the German U-boat *UB-31* began its difficult journey through the Dover Barrage. As it headed east, approximately three miles south of Folkestone, the submarine's periscope was sighted by the Admiralty drifter *Lord Leitrim* and a depth charge was dropped. As *UB-31* dived deeper, more drifters joined *Lord Leitrim*. Guided by a Royal Naval Air Service airship, they were able to track an oil leak and after firing more depth charges, *UB-31* was destroyed.

The Wreck Site

A U-boat wreck, lying close to the reported position of the drifter action, has been commonly assumed to be *UB-31*.

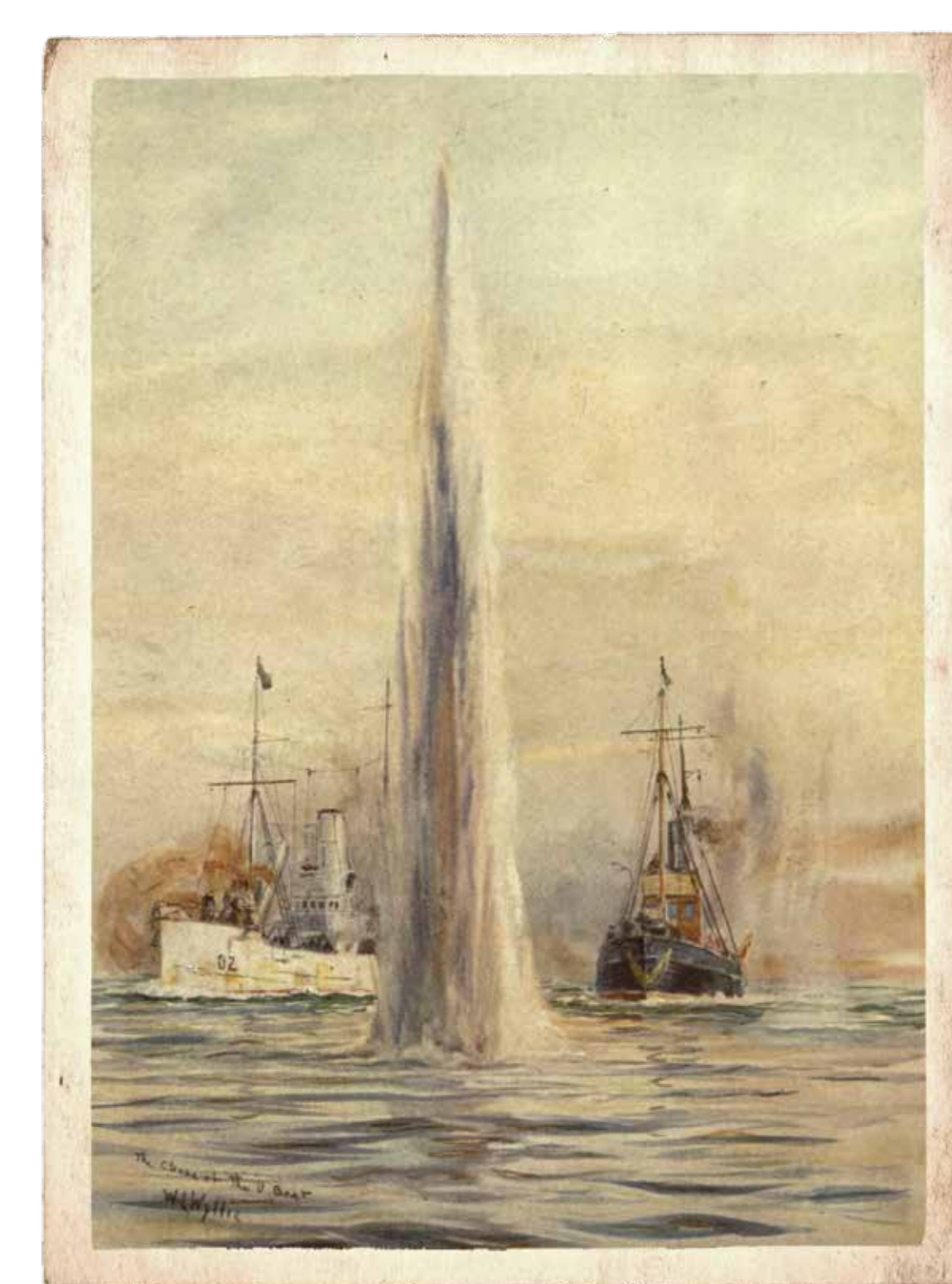
Is it though? Recent research by Dr Innes McCartney has identified a number of historic and archaeological clues that cast doubt on this version of events.

The wreck is in fact four miles from the scene of the drifter action on 2nd May and further examination of historic documents suggests that this position coincides almost exactly with the location of *UB-78*, which had been sunk several weeks earlier. It is possible, therefore, that on May 2nd the drifters depth charged a wreck that had actually been sunk the previous month and this is what accounted for the leaking oil.

It may be that the presumed wreck of *UB-31* relates to a known mine detonation on April 21st. However, historic records also point towards *UB-31* being responsible for sinking a French steamer off Cherbourg on April 25th!

The U-boat wreck in question has damage more consistent with an underwater mine explosion than that caused by depth charges and, unfortunately, the propellers which may have had markings clarifying the boat's identity, have been removed and cannot be traced. There is still some uncertainty, therefore, behind this U-boat wreck's identity.

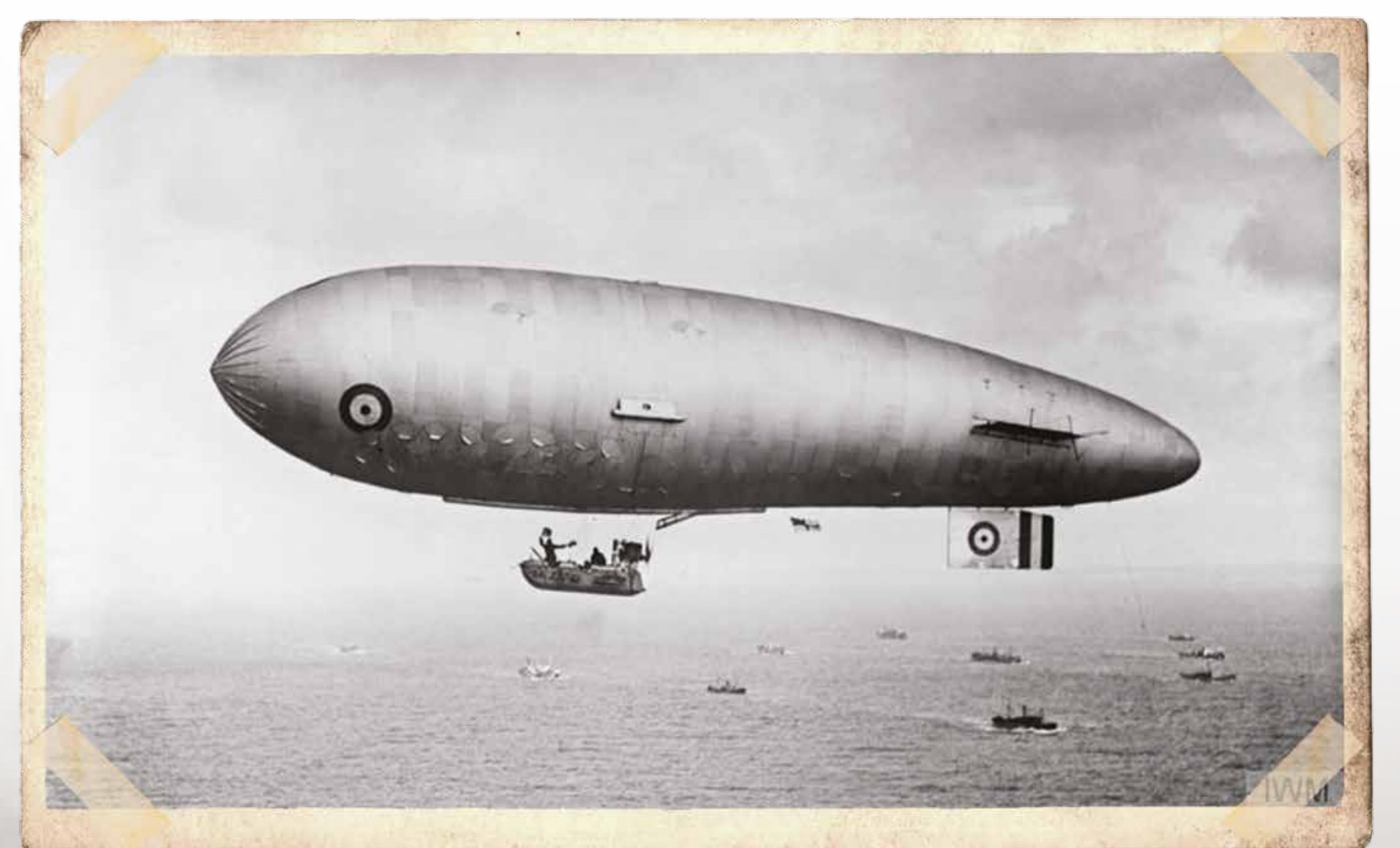
UB-31 provides an excellent example of some of the problems of identifying submarine wrecks. In his book, *The Maritime Archaeology of a Modern Conflict*, Dr McCartney compares the archaeological evidence on the seabed with relevant historic documents and demonstrates how archaeology can both support and contradict commonly held theories from our relatively recent history.



Left: Drifters of the Royal Navy drop depth charges on a suspected U-boat. As technology improved, the work of the U-boats became harder.

Original artwork by W. L. Wyllie, taken from *More Sea Fights of the Great War* (1919).

Below: A Sea Scout Zero class airship patrols over merchant shipping. SSZ 29 flying from the Royal Naval Air Service base at Capel, east of Folkestone, took part in the supposed action against *UB-31*. © IWM (Q 20643).



Background image: L. A. Shafer, 1918



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