



FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Dover Straits - misfortune or misjudgement?

The loss of 4 ships on 31st October 1915: SS *Eidvisa*, SS *Toward*, HMY *Aries*, HMT *Othello II*

The 31st October 1915 marks a tragic day for the British Royal Navy and the Mercantile Marine within the history of the Great War at sea in the Dover Straits. On this day four ships were mined and sunk at the hands of Oberleutnant Matthias Graf von Schmettow commander of the German U-boat submarine UC-6 of the Flanders Flotilla. This was a disaster that could have been avoided if the correct protocol regarding the naval control of shipping had been observed. A combination of errors and misjudgements condemned two merchant vessels, one trawler converted for minesweeping and the command vessel His Majesty's Yacht *Aries*.

Ships that wished to transit the passage between the Goodwin Sands and the coast of Kent were required to obtain Admiralty authorization before proceeding. A holding area at the Downs off Deal was used for awaiting merchant and other ships wishing to make the passage. The passage used was designated as the 'A' channel and this channel was swept on a daily basis weather permitting. Towards the end of October 1915 on the 28th and 29th a severe gale blew up the English Channel and through the Straits of Dover from a south south east direction. The conditions were such that the minesweepers, HMT (His Majesty's Trawler) *Othello II* and HMT *Jacamar* could not perform their sweeping duties. However, on the 30th October the weather abated somewhat and the minesweepers were ordered to continue with their work. HMT *Jacamar* was having difficulty deploying her sweep wire kite. The kite is a device on the tow wire for maintaining the sweep wire at a specified distance above the sea bed. HMT *Jacamar* returned to Dover for repairs to the kite and as the two minesweepers worked in tandem the minesweeping had to be suspended once again.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to the Admiralty the U-boat UC-6 had stealthily navigated its way into the deepest part of the 'A' channel under cover of the poor weather conditions that had prevailed during the previous forty-eight hours. Seven mines out of a total payload of fourteen mines were laid in a close-knit pattern designed not only to scupper unsuspecting ships in transit but also those ships that would be inevitably be involved in the rescue of any survivors. After laying the mines UC-6 departed quickly onto its next mission. SS *Toward* a British steam cargo vessel and SS *Eidsiva* a Norwegian steam cargo vessel were amongst those vessels waiting in the Downs area for transit permission. The Captains of these vessels were growing increasingly impatient and they complained bitterly to the Admiralty about the unacceptable delay.

At this point it is unclear whether or not the merchant vessels had received authorization to proceed, but proceed they did and just before 8 am the collier SS *Eidsiva* was the first to pay the price. Following was the Clyde Shipping Companies vessel SS *Toward* and she too became a victim when she struck a mine and began to sink bow first just a few hundred yards from her predecessor. The command vessel HMY *Aries* was on station in the area under the command of Lieutenant Commander H. Calder RNR RD. The RD decoration

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implied many years of service and experience. HMY *Aries* was a fine vessel of 268 tons, built to the highest Lloyds classification of 100A1 as a gentleman's ocean going leisure yacht. She had been owned by the 10th Duke of Leeds since 1890 and at the outbreak of war, the Duke immediately offered his vessel for war service. The *Aries* was alerted to the mined vessels fate and proceeded towards the area of carnage escorting three divisions of drifters which had been in mid channel tending to anti-submarine nets. The *Aries* signalled to the drifters to pick up survivors from the stricken ships and take them ashore. There were other armed trawlers in the vicinity and some were trying to stop any more merchant ships from entering the restricted zone. Signal flags from another trawler alerted the *Aries* to another mine seen floating nearby and the *Aries* went to investigate. The Captain of *Aries* ordered Sub Lieutenant Cranfield to go forward to the gunner's position and watch out for the mine. Looking out forward he failed to see a mine that was floating abeam of *Aries*. The mine struck amidships and exploded under the bridge of the vessel almost causing the yacht to break in two.



The Royal Yacht squadron's steam yacht Aries in waters off Naples by Antonio de Simone.

The engineers would have known little as the mine destroyed the engine room completely. The upward thrust of the explosion caused the bridge to be demolished. The Captain and other crew members on the bridge were torn to shreds by the flying debris causing traumatic injuries and shattered bones. Almost immediately both halves of the vessel began to sink. Through the smoke and debris Sub Lieutenant Cranfield caught sight of the paymaster and a fellow officer struggling in the water but before he could call out to them, they disappeared into the filthy, gale swept sea. *Aries* sank in 15 fathoms of water less than one mile off the South Foreland light vessel as escaping air and steam pronounced her death throes. Sub Lieutenant Cranfield and the two forward gunners were blown into the sea and were uninjured apart from the traumatic shock of the experience. Also, about a hundred feet away the aft gunner, the wireless operator and an able seaman were floating in the sea, the gunner having sustained broken ribs and a bad injury to his head and the wireless operator with broken ribs. The survivors' positions at the extreme fore and aft parts of the vessel had been their salvation. These were the only survivors from a total compliment of

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28. Out of the gloom the surviving men were met by a rescue trawler who hauled them aboard.

In the melée, the naval ships had realised they had been caught in a trap and that the mines had been sown in such a way that the rescue vessels would be similarly victimized. The *Othello II* had been ordered to continue North towards Deal at the beginning of the 'A' channel. She battled her way out to the site against a strong gale from the SSE and at 1155 hours she hit a mine laid by UC-6 which exploded and caused *Othello II* to sink. The mine detonated amidships and caused extensive damage to her port side amidships. Broken in two, she sank almost immediately. The wheelhouse was so badly shaken by the explosion that neither the doors nor the window would open. Inside were the skipper, second hand, helmsman, and a deck boy. The skipper, second hand and helmsman managed to push the lad out through a half-open window, and he was the only one saved of the whole ship's company. After the *Othello II* incident, orders were given to remove all the sliding doors of the trawlers' wheelhouses, and to substitute light canvas doors which could easily be pushed or kicked out in a sudden emergency.



HMT Othello II (www.coastalheritage.org.uk)



Memorial at Leathercote



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On the 2nd November 1915 an Admiralty Court of Enquiry into the loss of HMY *Aries* was completed. The concluding paragraph of this report read *"We regret in our opinion her Commanding Officer committed an error in proceeding for the purposes of endeavouring to locate and sink a mine, into an area which was under suspicion of being mined and which had been closed to traffic for some days, more especially as two steamers had been sunk in close proximity only an hour or two before"* However the Vice Admiral of the Dover Patrol had appended the document in ink, a note stating that *"No disciplinary action is possible against the Commanding Officer of *Aries*, as he has unfortunately lost his life, otherwise concur."* Throughout the report officers witnessed accounts were recorded not only of the HMY *Aries* but also SS *Eidsiva*, SS *Toward* and HMT *Othello II*. Despite these conclusions the courage of the Captain and crew was admired. In trying times and in poor weather it is difficult to follow orders to the letter when trying to save sailors and ships. These men excelled themselves and showed much bravery and this was recognised secretly by their Lordships sitting at the Court of Enquiry. A total of 23 lives and 2,784 tons of shipping had been lost in a couple of hours. Fittingly the Dover Patrol obelisk, high above on the white cliffs overlooks the wreck of the *Aries*.

The memorial obelisk at Leathercote Point near St Margaret's Bay was unveiled by HRH the Prince of Wales on 27 July 1921. A Book of Remembrance, containing the names of nearly 2,000 members of the Dover Patrol who lost their lives, is held in St Margaret's church.

Researched and written by Robert J. Steer. MAT Volunteer.
You can find out more about other shipwrecks of the Chanel crossing [here](#).

Sources

[1] "Saga of the Goodwins" and "Tales from Around the Goodwin Sands" written by David Chamberlain.

[2] www.coastalheritage.org.uk/ARIES

[3] <http://www.artnet.com/artists/antonio-de-simone/the-royal-yacht-squadrons-steam-yacht-aries-in-yEZ6WfH0INHf1edtdlyK-A2>