



FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Fishing Fleet Sunk off Cornwall March 1917 Safety in Numbers – An Illusion

On 24 March 1917, 9 British fishing smacks, *Alice*, *Boy Walter*, *Endeavour*, *Enigma*, *H.C.G.*, *May Flower*, *Qui Vive*, *Reindeer* and *Satanita* were in relatively close proximity fishing in an arc from SE to SSW between 12 and 15 miles from Eddystone Lighthouse. All nine were stopped and scuttled by German submarine UC-17 but fortunately there were no casualties. *Alice* was 61 tons, but the others were between 22 and 43 tons, so all small and defenceless against a submarine, and hailed from around the south of England, from Lowestoft to Porthleven.

At the Admiralty Enquiry (ADM 137/1294 1917), the Master of the FV *Alice* reported that he had been stood on deck at about 4.30pm, and witnessed a German submarine sinking two other fishing vessels, 3 or 4 miles away. There was not enough wind to escape and the FV *Alice* became the next target. The submarine approached and fired two warning shots. The crew were ordered to leave the vessel and go to the submarine. Once alongside, a German crewman boarded and demanded to be rowed out to the FV *Alice* where he attached bombs. Once back at the submarine, the bombs were detonated and the submarine submerged, leaving the crew stranded in their rowing boat. The crew of the FV *Alice* were picked up by the trawler FV *Satanita* at approx. 7.30pm which then fled towards Falmouth. But, the FV *Satanita* had not gone unnoticed. The Submarine surfaced nearby and the same ordeal was repeated. Both crews were finally rescued by HMT *Buffalo* and the accompanying oiler *Osceolia* and landed at Plymouth.

UC-17 was a Type UCII Coastal Minelayers class submarine, equipped with 7 torpedoes, 18 UC200 mines and 1 x 88mm deck gun with 133 rounds. Commanded from May 1915 – May 1917 by Oblt. Ralph Wenninger (Pour le Mérite), UC-17 had 4 commanders, Wenninger being the first, and operated out of Flandern Flotilla, then I Flotilla totalling 21 patrols. On 26 November 1918, UC-17 (under the command of Oblt. Freiherr Nikolaus von Lyncker) surrendered and was broken up at Preston in 1919 or 1920.

Wenninger was captured and taken as a prisoner of war on 22 April 1918 when the U-boat he was then in command of, UB-55, hit a mine in the Dover Barrage. The majority of the crew escaped but 8 were found aboard and taken prisoner by the British trawler *Mate*. During the First World War, Wenninger was responsible for the sinking of 97 Merchant Vessels.

Written and researched by MAT volunteer, Roger Burns.

Sources:

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