

# FORGOTTEN WRECKS CORNWALL

**U-boats were the most serious threat to shipping in the English Channel and the Western Approaches during the war. They could easily negotiate the Dover Straits without being detected and take merchant and naval vessels unawares.**

**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. In fact, solitary ships were easier to intercept and attack than large groups and convoys were extremely successful at protecting merchant ships from U-boats.**

## Indian City, Headlands and Andalusian

In early 1915, submarine warfare was conducted according to international rules of war and a 'gentlemanly' code of conduct.

### Loss

On the 18th March 1915, the U-boat SM U-29 stopped the *Indian City*, a brand new British cargo steamer, 10 miles south of the Isles of Scilly. After warning the vessel to stop, the submarine commander gave the crew 20 minutes to abandon ship before torpedoing it. The crew of *Indian City* had taken to their lifeboats and U-29 towed their nearer to land. U-29's commander even invited *Indian City*'s captain on board the U-boat for a glass of wine, which he accepted!

As they approached land the submarine left the crew and headed in the direction of another steamer. The captain of the *Headlands* was less willing to surrender his vessel and turned away from the U-boat at full speed, but to no avail. As the U-boat came alongside, the commander gave the crew only 5 minutes to abandon ship before firing a torpedo into its hull.

A few hours later a third steamer was sighted by U-29 and after a warning shot the crew were given 10 minutes to escape. The U-boat crew attempted to scuttle the *Andalusian* then towed the crew back towards the Isles of Scilly. In fact all of the crews reached land safely.

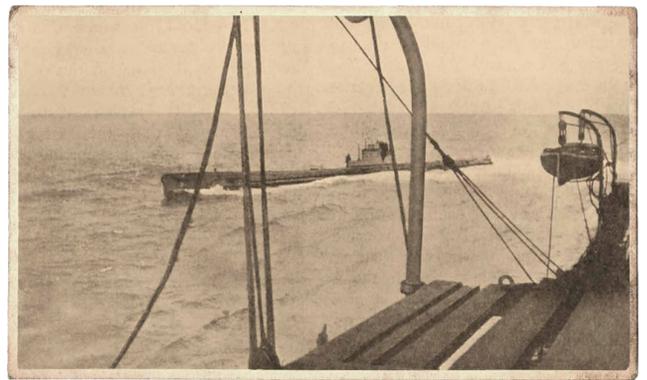
Both *Indian City* and *Headlands* sank later in the day, but the *Andalusian* drifted out of sight and it was some time before her loss was confirmed.

### SM U-29

The commander of U-29 was Otto Weddigen, who had revolutionised submarine warfare in 1914 when, in command of U-9, he sank three Royal Navy cruisers in just over an hour. After sinking *Andalusian* he took U-29 north and around Scotland, but on the 18th March the U-boat was rammed by HMS *Dreadnought* and Weddigen and his entire crew were lost.

### The Wreck Sites

The likely remains of the *Indian City* and *Headlands* have been identified in 100m of water south of the Isles of Scilly. The *Andalusian*, which sank out of sight, is believed to be the identity of a wreck to the west of the islands.



**Above:** SM U-29, photographed from SS *Headlands* minutes before the ship was torpedoed. The Master took several photos of the submarine which he later sent to the Admiralty. The image was published in the *Illustrated London News* in April 1915.

**Right:** The Admiralty were unimpressed with some of the vessel Masters, but grudgingly acknowledged the conduct of the U-boat commander. Transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 137/1059.

#### S.S. "Indian City" - Action of Master

The Master no doubt was actuated by a desire to avoid risking the lives of any of his crew, which would have been exposed to some risk if the ship had tried to escape and had been torpedoed while so doing. It is considered that the more correct conduct of a British Master would have been to use his utmost endeavour to escape and not stop his ship or quit it until there was no hope of saving her - more especially as he was only 9 or 10 miles from land.

#### S.S. "Headlands" - Action of Master

The action of the Master of S.S. "Headlands" stands out in pleasing relief. He declined to stop or surrender but apparently kept his course until torpedoed. Suggest Board of Trade be invited to commend him (through his Owners) on his endeavour to save his ship.

#### S.S. "Andalusian" - Action of Master

The Master does not appear to have made the utmost endeavour to save his ship, but the same remarks apply as in the case of the "Indian City".

#### Conduct of U.29.

The Commanding Officer of U.29 seems to have paid more respect to the usages of war than the Officers in command of other enemy submarines, but he cannot be said to have left the crews "in safety".

## SM U-103

In May 1918, the hunter became the hunted when Kapitänleutnant Claus Rucker of U-103 prepared to attack the ocean liner SS *Olympic*.



**Above:** The *Olympic* in the dazzle camouflage paint scheme that was applied in 1917. This painting, currently in the Canadian War Museum, was painted by war artist Arthur Lismer in 1919.

### Convoys

*Olympic*, sister ship to the ill-fated *Titanic*, was requisitioned by the Admiralty for war work in 1915. In May 1918, with an escort of American destroyers, *Olympic* was heading for France carrying 9,000 American troops. South of Cornwall, a number of U-boats lay in wait, hoping to intercept the fast convoys coming into the English Channel.

### Loss

In the early hours of the 12th May, U-103's lookouts spotted the liner, but the submarine was sighted as it prepared to attack. Guns on *Olympic* opened fire and Captain Bertram Hayes turned his ship towards the U-boat at ramming speed. U-103 dived but the *Olympic* rammed into its port side causing it to sink stern first to a depth of 50m.

Severely damaged, the tanks of U-103 were blown to bring the U-boat back to the surface and 36 men were able to escape; 27 of them were picked up by the destroyer USS *Davis*.

*Olympic* continued on to France and Captain Bertram Hayes was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for this action. After the war he was knighted for "valuable services in connection with the transport of troops during the War".

### The Wreck Site

Today the wreck of U-103 lies at a depth of approximately 90m halfway between Cornwall and France. Its location and depth makes it largely inaccessible to divers but in 2008 it was surveyed by a Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) and subsequently identified.

During the First World War, 200 U-boats were lost with more than 5,000 officers and crew. They are commemorated on the U-boat Memorial at Moltentort near Kiel, Germany.

Background Image: Claus Bergen 1918



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