

FORGOTTEN WRECKS

SUSSEX

Submarines were the greatest hazard to shipping in the English Channel during the First World War. In 1915 and again in 1916, Germany attempted anti-commerce offensives to restrict merchant trade. In 1917 they commenced their most serious effort with a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, meaning any ship was at risk of attack.

The Sussex coast, within easy reach of the Flanders Flotilla based in Bruges, proved to be an ideal hunting ground for U-boats. In 1917 and early 1918, ships were sunk on an almost daily basis.

SS Tycho and Porthkerry

The dangers of lingering in an area known to contain U-boats, even when on a mercy mission, were graphically illustrated in In May 1917.

The sinking of the Tycho and Porthkerry is a conspicuous instance of German callousness. The U-boat commander waited until the Tycho's boats were alongside the Porthkerry before discharging his second torpedo, and thereby killed 15 men without the slightest excuse or necessity. He could have torpedoed the Porthkerry before those lifeboats were alongside her, but apparently he preferred that her sinking should be accompanied by loss of life. There seems to be no other explanation of his conduct.

Above: The losses of Tycho and Porthkerry were included in a 1918 publication called *The German Pirate, his Methods and Record*. Written under a pseudonym, the book may have been authored by a Royal Navy officer and appears to be a propaganda book, possibly written for an American audience to describe the maritime war around Britain's coast.

SS Tycho

In May 1917 the SS Tycho was nearing the end of a voyage from Bombay to Hull with 5,700 tons of general cargo. Hull was the vessel's home port and some of her crew of 33 would undoubtedly have been looking forward to arriving home, having left Bombay on 25th March.

In the early evening of 20th May 1917, whilst south of Shoreham-by-Sea, Tycho was torpedoed by the German submarine UB-40, commanded by Hans Howaldt. The torpedo hit abreast of No. 2 hatch and the ship immediately began to sink. There were no casualties at this point and the crew abandoned ship into the lifeboats. The Tycho sank within half an hour, the Master having destroyed her confidential papers.

SS Porthkerry

Nearby, the SS Porthkerry was on a voyage from Cardiff to Sheerness with a cargo of coal, and saw the crew of Tycho abandoning ship. A smaller vessel, Porthkerry had a crew of 19.

In defiance of Admiralty instructions, Porthkerry proceeded to the vicinity of Tycho to recover survivors and Tycho's boat came alongside her. As the survivors began to board the Porthkerry, the reason behind the Admiralty instruction not to linger in the area of a U-boat became ominously clear. Porthkerry was hit by a torpedo fired from the same submarine (UB-40) that had sunk Tycho. The torpedo struck in the boiler room, killing the Master, the Chief Officer and 5 of her crew as well as 15 of the crew from Tycho - including her Master - who were still alongside in their lifeboats. The Porthkerry sank in 7 minutes.

All of the casualties (a total of 22) occurred on, or near, the Porthkerry. The survivors, 18 from Tycho and 12 from Porthkerry, were picked up by another nearby ship, the SS Esperanto before being transferred to the tug Mercedes III and landed at Newhaven. Some of the casualties are buried at Rottingdean, Sussex.

The Wrecks

The wrecks lie close together about 12 miles south of Shoreham-by-Sea. Porthkerry lies in a depth of 42m, upright in two pieces in a large valley. Tycho lies in 45m of water. Neither wreck has any form of protection.

SS Moldavia

A former P&O liner pressed into war service, this steamship's loss led to the first casualties amongst the United States' 4th Infantry Division.

Convoys

SS Moldavia was a British passenger steamship owned by the P&O Steam Navigation Company. After she was launched in 1903, she spent most of her time travelling between England and Australia via the Suez Canal. One of the ship's notable features was the 1,000 portholes lining her sides.

In 1915, Moldavia was purchased by the Admiralty and converted into an armed merchant cruiser. Approximately 70 passenger steamships were modified in this way during the war; the Royal Navy sought to make use of their high speed for war work. Moldavia was armed with eight six-inch guns and her portholes were blacked out.

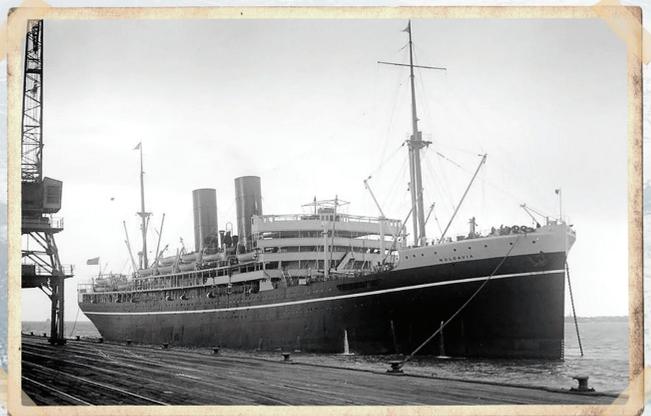
Loss

In March 1918, Moldavia was despatched to Canada and on the 11th May 1918 she left Halifax, Nova Scotia, with convoy HCl, bound for London. As well as acting as an escort for the convoy, Moldavia carried cargo and several hundred men of the United States' 58th Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division, part of the 1.5 million men who sailed from America to Europe after the US declared war on Germany in 1917.

On the 23rd May 1918, whilst steaming south of Beachy Head, Moldavia was struck on the port side by a torpedo fired by UB-57. The explosion tore a hole in the hull and killed 56 US servicemen, but the engines were undamaged and the ship continued to steam. Slowly she listed to port, but as internal bulkheads failed the ship gradually started leaning to starboard. The engines failed as water took hold below and escort vessels took all the survivors off before she sank.

The Wreck Site

Today the Moldavia lies relatively intact in 50 metres of water approximately 30 miles south of Littlehampton. Artefacts recovered from the wreck include portholes and lamps, decklight covers and light fittings, a brass gun sight, fire hose fitting, crockery and cutlery.



Above: SS Moldavia prior to her loss in 1918.

Background Image: Claus Bergen 1918



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