

# FORGOTTEN WRECKS

## SUSSEX

After submarines, mines presented the greatest danger to shipping in the English Channel. German U-boats slipped through the Dover Straits to lay mines in shipping lanes, and many merchant vessels and warships were lost to these underwater explosives.

In the early years of the war, before the invention of the depth charge, mines were also the Royal Navy's best weapon to use against U-boats. The Dover Straits were blocked by mines and minefields were often laid in areas that U-boats were known to patrol, in the hope that they might score a lucky success.

### HMS Ariadne

An obsolete cruiser, *Ariadne* found new work as a minelayer. Her cargo may well still be a hazard on the seabed.

#### Convoys

The rapid development of ship design and technology meant that when HMS *Ariadne*, a *Diadem* class Protected Cruiser, was launched in 1898, she was essentially already obsolete. After being converted to a stoker training vessel in 1913, she was given a new role during the war as a minelayer. After being converted in March 1917, *Ariadne* worked on the Dover Barrage, a chain of nets, mines and patrols that stretched across the Dover Straits.

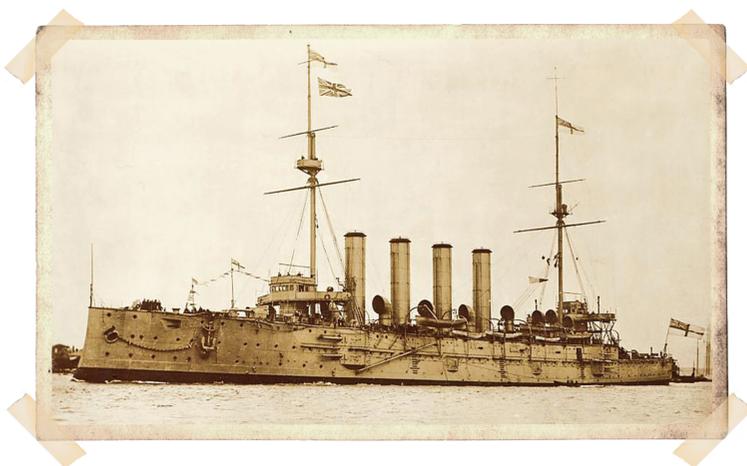
#### Loss

On 26th July 1917, while steaming down the English Channel to Portsmouth with some 400 mines, *Ariadne* was sighted by Commander Otto Steinbrinck of *UC-65*. The U-boat fired a single torpedo that struck *Ariadne* on the port side amidships. The cruiser did not sink immediately and the commanding officer, Captain Harry Hesketh Smyth RN, prepared for the ship to be taken in tow by her destroyer escorts. However, 50 minutes later, whilst the escorts were alongside, another torpedo slammed into the ship, which quickly caused it to heel over and sink. The survivors (including the Captain Hesketh Smyth) were picked up by nearby vessels, but 38 officers and crew were lost.

#### The Wreck Site

After the war, the wreck of HMS *Ariadne* was the subject of a number of salvage efforts. These were generally based on the use of explosives to break up the wreck and recover the metal. The wreck today, therefore, is very dispersed, comprising clusters of debris, some of which are likely to contain unexploded mines from the ship's cargo.

Right: HMS *Ariadne* prior to conversion as a minelayer.



### SM UB-81

A combination of tragic events resulted in the loss of the brand new coastal U-boat SM UB-81 and 29 of its crew in December 1917.

#### Loss

On 2nd December 1917, SM UB-81 was patrolling south of the Isle of Wight when it hit a mine and sank. The rear of the submarine was badly damaged, but by pumping air into the forward tanks, the crew managed to get the bow of the vessel clear of the water. By removing a loaded torpedo, several men were able to crawl up the torpedo tube and escape. Conditions outside were so unpleasant that several of the crew returned inside saying they would rather die below than freeze outside. The Royal Navy patrol vessel HMS P32 came alongside to assist, but hit the bow of the U-boat. Water poured into the torpedo tube and the submarine sank, drowning the remaining men on board.

#### Controversy

Historic sources paint different pictures of the loss. Although the log book of HMS P32 makes no mention of the collision, German survivors repeatedly suggests the patrol boat rammed the U-boat.

#### The Wreck Site

Today the remains of SM UB-81 lie in nearly 30m of water south of Portsmouth. It is designated as a Controlled Site under the Protection of Military Remains Act - making it illegal to dive on the site.

A number of sources have been consulted to find out more about the loss of SM UB-81.

10.16	a/c S74E to investigate Rockets seen SSE from Culver.
10.45	Picked up 2 officers & 5 men (one man died) from mined German submarine S.M. U.B.81. Survivors placed under arrest & isolated. Papers & personal property examined & handed over to C in C on arrival in harbour.

The log book of HMS P32. Transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 53/56393.

**Details of the Sinking**

Both officers stated that after losing the anchor the boat had steered very badly, they thought it was possible that they might have had a certain amount of cable in tow which might have fouled some mine workings and eventually caused the mine to explode. In any case it seems improbable that the mine exploded in contact with the submarine, as the actual damage caused was only slight.

According to the narrative of the survivors, the submarine was at a depth of about 25 metres (82 ft.) when a dull explosion was heard aft. Immediately after, two men came running forward with the report that water was entering the stern compartment. The watertight doors were immediately closed; but the force of the explosion had sprung a number of rivets and water was beginning to enter the second compartment. Owing to the sudden ingress of water, the air pressure became enormous and breathing was rendered very difficult. Some idea of this may be gathered from the experience of Able Seaman Blunck, who out of curiosity took his pistol, counting 127 beats to the minute. An attempt was made to rise to the surface; but this was found to be impossible, as the submarine had lost her trim, and the after tanks, which had been damaged by the explosion, could not be blown. By this time the situation of the crew became one of intense discomfort. For the vessel had lost her trim to an extent of about 55°.

As the stern of "U.S. 81" was resting on the bottom in a depth of about 28 metres (15.3 fms), the Captain proposed that an attempt should be made to escape through the forward tubes. Some time was spent in discussion and preparation, and eventually, after a torpedo from the upper starboard tube had been withdrawn and rendered harmless, three men were pushed into the tube. A box was introduced behind the last man to act as support and to afford bearing surface. The sea cup was then cautiously opened, and when it was found that the mouth of the tube was well over a foot above the level of the water, the men in the interior of the boat, by bearing against the box, raised the human load through.

Survivor interrogation reports compiled by the Admiralty. Transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 137/4126.

London,  
13 December, 1917.

My Dear Parents,

Well, your youngest son can now await the end of the war in safety. As you have probably already heard, I am one of the 6 survivors of the beautiful "B. 81", which met her fate on her very first voyage. No one who went through that time will forget it. It is incredible, inconceivable, that we six survivors should have had such extraordinary luck.

I will try, however, to describe the events of those hours - always supposing, of course, that the English Censor has no objection. I trust that it is not against the rules of English Censorship.

A letter from Able Seaman Blunck to his parents. Transcribed from The National Archives document ADM 137/4126.

Background image: L. A. Shafer, 1918



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