

## The Strange Tale of U-16

The following story appeared in the Daily Mail on Friday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1939:

### **'U-BOAT WRECK FOUND – Washed up on Goodwin Sands**

*The shattered wreck of a German submarine was found yesterday washed up on the Goodwin Sands, it was announced by the Admiralty last night.*

*Deal boatmen who passed nearby could see the greater part of the conning tower protruding from the water on the south-west part of the sandbank.*

*A salvage vessel began work there yesterday and divers were employed.*

*It is not possible to estimate in what action this submarine was sunk, as neither the location of sea battles nor the identity of enemy ships sunk may be published.'*

It is telling that even the details of the demise of an enemy submarine were seen as top secret in 1939. Things were to change rapidly as it slowly dawned on the government that these stories might just be good for morale!

The next day, on Saturday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1939, the Daily Mail published the following paragraph:

### **'U-BOAT WRECK – 50 DEAD**

*Between 50 and 60 bodies have been taken from the hull of the shattered U-boat discovered on the Goodwin Sands. Parts of the wreckage could be seen with the aid of telescopes from the shore at Deal yesterday.'*

The harsh censorship rules which shackled editors at this time could do no other than prompt the newspapers to resort to that age-old journalistic saying, "*never let the truth ruin a good story.*" The newspaper just made up the number of crewmen recovered from the submarine. In reality, this type of U-boat would not have had half that number in its crew.

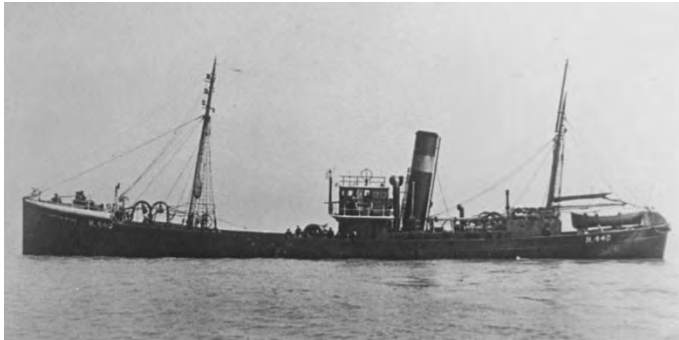
*Source-Historic England:* In wartime there are some vessels whose fate seems to involve one thing after another, exacerbated by the 'fog of war' in which events are not wholly clear even to those who have taken part in them, **U-16** on 25 October 1939 is a case in point.



The news of U-16's loss (*left*), followed the recent tragedy of HMS *Royal Oak*, torpedoed in the apparent safety of the Scapa Flow anchorage, Orkney, on 14 October 1939, by U-47 under the command of Günther Prien. Barely six weeks into the war it was already apparent that the U-boat threat to Britain was significant.

On the afternoon of Tuesday 24 October 1939 an anti-submarine indicator loop at St. Margaret's Bay, Kent, picked up suspicious activity in the Straits of Dover. The Kingfisher-class patrol sloop HMS *Puffin* and the requisitioned trawler

HMS *Cayton Wyke* (below), were sent to investigate. So far, the defence of the Straits of Dover differed little from the previous war in the use of loops, of smaller patrol vessels in the form of naval and requisitioned fishing vessels, and of a mine barrage.



As their counterparts had also done in the previous war, one after the other, the two vessels dropped depth charges in the vicinity of their target some three miles east by south of St. Margaret's Bay.

It seems that the effect of this was to disable the submarine, but not so severely that communications were disrupted: the

U-boat was able to send a radio message in the early hours of 25 October 1939.

On Thursday 26 October, a German U-boat was discovered stranded on the Goodwin Sands but with no explanation of how it had got there. A statement prepared by the Admiralty and widely disseminated in the press, said:

*'How the submarine went aground was not explained last night. Gunfire was heard off Deal on Wednesday, when it was believed that an enemy submarine might have been attacked, but nothing could be seen because of mist.'*

*'Another theory is that the submarine may have been sunk a few days ago off Folkestone and may have drifted or bumped along the sea bed and become fast on the Goodwins.'*

A smokescreen had been thrown up by the Admiralty. Both 'theories' allowed to materialise in the press certainly had a germ of truth to them – an enemy submarine was certainly attacked 'a few days ago' somewhere between Deal and Folkestone barrage. An emphasis on 'gunfire' nicely side-stepped [mentioning] the use of depth charges or the presence of a mine barrage, although some further conjecture from Deal also made it into the press release, albeit still carefully worded:

*'It is thought possible at Deal that the U-boat did not go on to the Goodwins under her own power, but was sunk in deeper waters by depth charges or bombs and that some of her bulk heads may have remained undamaged, permitting her to bump along the seabed, carried along by the current.'*

To coin a phrase apt in the maritime context, the waters were muddied by a claim that *'a large German submarine has been sunk by the French. This is confirmed by the finding of the bodies of the crew. A message from Dunkirk states that the British Admiralty was represented when the French authorities gave a Naval funeral yesterday to a U-boat officer and five German sailors . . . '*

This funeral was well attended by both French and British naval representatives, and jointly led by both Protestant and Catholic clergy to cover Germany's two principal religions. The *Yorkshire Post* was of the view that the funeral was 'almost the last flicker of chivalry in warfare'.

The German High Command admitted the loss of three U-boats. Five are recorded as lost for the month of October 1939, but none of these are attributed to French action. Two were depth-charged by British ships in the North Atlantic south-west of Ireland on 13 and 14 October respectively (*U-42* and *U-45*),

and three in the Straits of Dover: *U-12*, which was mined on 8 October; *U-40*, which also fell to a British minefield on 13 October; and *U-16*, attributed to a British minefield.

Could French action have contributed to the demise of *U-16*? The French press reported that their Navy had recently been active and that a patrol vessel had recovered some bodies from a submarine sunk off Dunkirk. That patrol vessel was the *Épinal*, which had launched a night attack on a submarine on 26 October (presumably in the early hours of that day), while acting on intelligence that U-boat activity was expected in the Straits of Dover on 26-27 October.

It thus seems that the *Épinal* might have been the last on the scene, which is also suggested by her crew recovering the U-boat commander alive. Action by British and French patrols, unknown to each other, would also account for the actions reported in the press as heard at different times in different places. Some sources suggest that the *Épinal* was first on the scene, with the British second, but this fits less well with the time frame and the known actions of *HMS Puffin* (below), and *Cayton Wyke*.



That U-boat commander subsequently died despite being taken to hospital. He was identified as Kapitänleutnant Horst Wellner and, it seems, the loss may have been attributed to *U-14*. It is possible that his lifejacket was marked *U-14*, which he had commanded up until two weeks previously, his service aboard *U-14* ending on 11 October 1939, before taking on the command of *U-16* the following day.

The British and French press widely reported the discovery of '50 or 60' bodies, surely a conjecture or an exaggeration for propaganda purposes, since the normal crew complement was 22-24. In total 19 bodies washed ashore or were picked up at sea on the Kent coast, near Dunkirk, and Ameland, Netherlands. It seems likely that four bodies were recovered from the wreck by the British, since four German seamen whose date of death is 25th October 1939 are buried in Cannock Chase German Cemetery, namely, Paul Hanf, Hans Keil, Rolf Krämer, and Friedhelm Mahnke, and these four, together with the 19 bodies washed ashore, would fit with a crew complement of 23.

Did the Goodwin Sands themselves play a part in the U-boat's loss? It would have been all too easy for a disabled submarine to drift helplessly and become ensnared upon the sands, an easy prey for any patrol vessel happening by. The 'Demon Sands' headline in the *Manchester Evening Press* made good copy and the article rehashed the many legends of the Goodwin Sands: though fanciful, it almost seems to suggest that the Sands themselves had reached out to snare the enemy.

The expression 'ships that pass in the night' reveals a fundamental truth about not only shipping movements but also shipping losses: a spider's web spins out interconnecting one wreck with another. Wellner in *U-14* (which would be scuttled in 1945 off Wilhelmshaven as the Allies closed in on Germany) had been responsible for the reconnaissance mission which had led to the very recent loss of *HMS Royal Oak* in Scapa Flow.

Similarly, *U-16*'s British attacker *HMS Cayton Wyke* would herself be lost to war causes on 8 July 1940, near the *U-16* on the Goodwin Sands: her position of loss links her both to her victim and to the landscape of war in which she served as patrol vessel. *HMS Puffin* would survive the war, closing the war as she had begun, by accounting for a German submarine.

By the end of October, the *U-16* was regarded as unsalvageable: '*The submarine is little more than a shattered wreck, and the remains are gradually sinking into the sand owing to the continuance of the bad weather.*'

Fairly unusually for the Goodwin Sands, where even very recent wrecks have disappeared completely, the site of the *U-16* has a secure charting history since early 1940 as the location of a submarine, although the identity of the site is not confirmed. However, the description of her position 'near' two other wrecks, now among those which have disappeared, may provide a clue to their location: the uncharted *Sibiria* and the *Val Salice*, both lost in the same storm in 1916, whose charting is now regarded as 'dead'. This suggests that in 1939 either that they remained partially visible or at least their positions were still within living memory among the seamen of the Kent coast.

*Source-U-Boat.net*: *U-16* sent its last radio message at 04.15 hours on 25 October 1939 while returning from a minelaying operation off Folkestone, stating the intention to scuttle the heavily damaged U-boat. The wreck was discovered by British forces aground on the Goodwin Sands later that day and briefly investigated by RN divers who found it with conning tower just awash and extensively damaged forward. A salvage attempt failed due to poor weather and was not repeated because the wreck was full of silt and eventually disappeared in shifting sands. No survivors were found and in the following weeks the bodies of 19 crew members, all wearing a lifesaving apparatus, were recovered or washed ashore, most between Dungeness and Hythe, the commanding officer and five men at the French coast near Dunkirk and one man on the Dutch island Ameland.

It seems the U-boat was detected passing the St. Margaret's Bay indicator loop around noon on 24 October and *HMS Puffin* was sent to investigate, dropping three single depth charges on a possible contact during the afternoon followed up by a pattern dropped by *HMS Cayton Wyke*. Earlier reports credited the sinking of *U-16* to these depth charge attacks, but the extensive damage of the wreck indicates that the U-boat struck a mine in the Dover-Calais barrage, possibly after evading the attacks mentioned above.

*Source-Wikipedia*: From 2 September 1939, until 25 October 1939, *U-16* took part in the laying of mines in open water in and around the English Channel, to hamper allied shipping. On 28 September 1939, *U-16* sank the Swedish 3,378 GRT *Nyland*. The 57 GRT French *Sainte Claire* was sunk by one of the mines laid by *U-16* on 21 November 1939.

On 25 October 1939, *U-16* was transiting the Dover Strait when it was attacked by *HMS Puffin* and *HMS Cayton Wyke*. Trying to avoid the depth charges from both ships, *U-16* ran aground on the Goodwin Sands, an area that was notorious for both sides. *U-16* was lost with all hands; other U-Boats were subsequently obliged to take the significantly longer route north of Scotland to the Western Approaches and the north Atlantic.

It seems that even today, no one knows exactly how, or why the destruction of *U-16* came about.

Finally, this story has touched on a couple of other areas about which I certainly knew very little. I haven't come across 'indicator loops' or 'controlled mining' before, which made me think I ought to look into it a little more deeply, with the following results.

### **Indicator Loops**

*Source-A.I.:* Indicator loops on the Goodwin Sands during WWII were part of a specialised, secret, and largely passive anti-submarine surveillance system. They were long lengths of electrical cable laid on the seabed (in the "Downs" area between the Sands and the Kent coast) designed to detect enemy submarines. The loops operated by detecting the disruption in the Earth's magnetic field caused by the steel hull of a submarine passing overhead, which induced a small electric current in the cable. The current was monitored by operators at a shore-based "Loop Control Station" (such as those in the Dover/Deal area), which would trigger an alarm when a signal was detected. They were deployed during World War II, often in conjunction with other defences like "controlled mining" (remote-controlled mines) to intercept enemy vessels.

### **Controlled Mining**

In World War II, controlled mining referred to a specialised type of defensive sea minefield where the mines were anchored to the seabed and connected by electrical cables to a shore-based observation post or control room. Unlike typical "influence" mines that explode automatically when a ship passes over, controlled mines allowed operators on land to detonate them at a specific moment.

The mines were fired remotely by operators who could observe a target vessel (such as a German U-boat or merchant ship) passing over the mine's location. They were primarily used for coastal defence, protecting harbours, and securing naval anchorages from invasion. A key advantage was the ability to allow friendly vessels to pass through the defensive zone safely. The mines could be kept in an inert state or fired on command.

Controlled mines were often used in conjunction with "indicator loops"—underwater cables that detected the magnetic signature of passing submarines, which then signalled the onshore operators to fire the controlled mines. These systems were utilised by various navies, including the British Royal Navy (at sites like Deal and Cromarty), the Royal Australian Navy (in ports like Newcastle and Brisbane), and the U.S. Army Mine Planter Service. By the end of World War II, these fixed, controlled minefields were largely phased out as they were replaced by more sophisticated, autonomous influence mines.