

# Unseen Death on our Doorstep

In 2006, scuba divers off Trevoze Head located a previously unknown German U-boat (*short for Unterseeboot = Undersea boat*), and subsequent dives in the area found two more U-boats. They were heavily corroded and within a few decades may be gone. All three had a snorkel, confirming they were of a type used by the Germans late in the war to allow the boats to travel at periscope depth below the surface. To find three unknown U-boats within such a small area was a puzzle. Subsequent research was able to identify the vessels and explain how they met their fate.

Towards the end of the war in the Atlantic, allied anti-submarine tactics were proving effective and U-boats were being sunk in great numbers. The German Naval Command (*Kriegsmarine*) decided to try a new strategy of attacking merchant shipping convoys close inshore. Unknown to the Germans, at the end of October 1944 codebreakers at Bletchley Park were able to read the messages sent by the Enigma cipher machines about these new tactics, and the Admiralty was able to instigate counter measures before the U-boats even arrived in our waters. As a defence against ship-borne invasion, large minefields had already been laid across the Irish sea. International agreements required the locations of these minefields to be published in order that merchant shipping would not get caught. Routes for their use were left closer inshore.

The principal Admiralty anti-submarine measure consisted of laying submerged mines in rows along the cleared routes used by merchant shipping. The mines were dropped off the back of a mine-laying vessel to sink to the bottom. When they touched the sea bed a mechanism was triggered to allow the mine to rise on a cable. This depth was pre-set by the mine-layers such that surface ships would pass harmlessly over them, but they would be a death trap for enemy submarines. Those mines off north Cornwall were set to be 70 feet below the water. On November 25th 1944, the minelayer HMS Apollo was instructed to lay three lines of deep mines off Trevoze Head named HWA1 to HWA3. Later that month, HMS Plover began laying more deep mines eventually continuing up to Hartland Point with 8 more fields HYA1 to HYA8. There were now over 1,200 mines in 11 deep fields along this coastal section. Right to the end of the war, the Germans were unaware of these deep minefields. Presumably, any U-boat that found them never lived to tell the tale.

The three U-boats off Trevoze Head were all caught by the mines laid by HMS Apollo and HMS Plover. The research showed they were U-400, U-1021 and U-325.

**U-400:** The first U-boat to be sunk. She was commissioned March 18th 1944 and commanded by Kapitänleutnant Horst Creutz. After a similar period of training, Creutz and his 49 crewmen left Kristiansund, Norway, for their first war patrol on November 18th 1944. Only a week after HMS Apollo laid those deep mines off Trevoze Head, U-400 received her orders on December 4th to proceed to north Cornwall to attack coastal convoys. She was never seen again.

**U-1021:** She was commissioned May 25th 1944 and commanded by Oberleutnant zur see William Holpert. On February 20th 1945, Holpert and his 42 crewmen left Bergen, Norway, for their one and only war patrol. He received his last orders on 8th March 1945, but no further contact was ever made. The British steamer *Rolfsborg* was proceeding northwards about 4 miles off Trevoze Head on March 14th when she heard a heavy explosion. Patches of oil were later seen on the surface. This accords with the position of the wreck, and *Rolfsborg* may well have heard the end of U-1021.

**U-325:** She was commissioned May 6th 1944, and commanded by Oberleutnant zur see Erwin Dohrn. After 6 months training, Dohrn and his crew of 51 men had two unsuccessful patrols before their final voyage. U-325 left Trondheim, Norway, on March 20th 1945 for the three week journey around Scotland and the west coast of Ireland to Cornwall. On 10th April Dohrn received his final orders to patrol Cornish waters, the decision on whether to choose the north or south coast was left to him. That was the last contact with U-325.

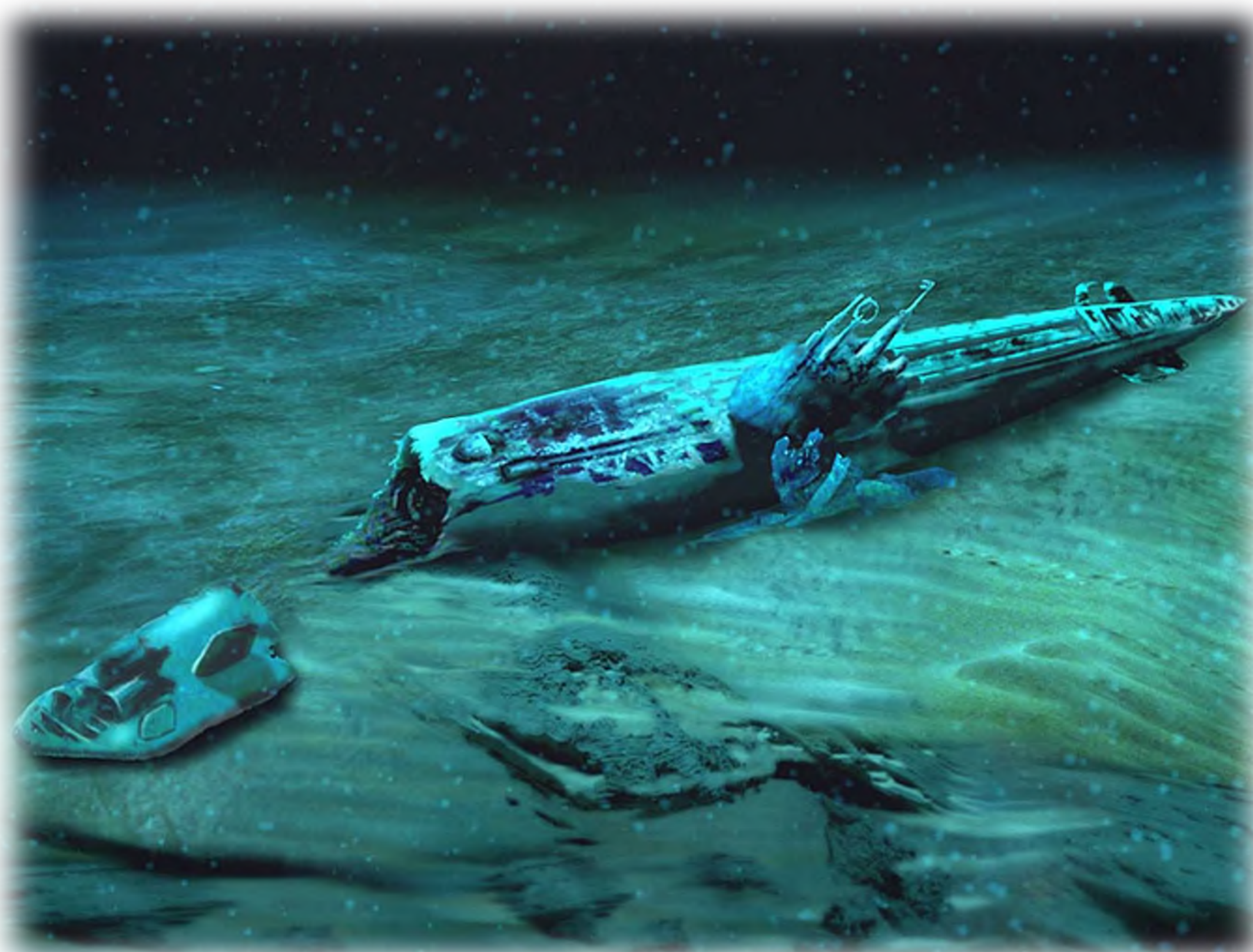


*The locations of U-325, U-400 and U-1021, and the fields of mines that destroyed them*

After the fates of these three U-boats became known, Ubbo Willms, whose 19 year old uncle, also Ubbo Willms, perished in U-400, travelled with his family from Germany to Cornwall. They took a boat out of Padstow and held a memorial service above the spot where his uncle and 49 crewmates died. The German U-boat service had a very high casualty rate. Of the 40,000 men sent out, less than 10,000 came back.

## Sources

TV Programme *Deep Wreck Mysteries: U-boat Death Trap* broadcast 30/12/2014 on Yesterday TV Channel  
<http://msptv.co.uk/index.php/programmes/deep-wreck-mysteries-series-one/u-boat-death-trap/>  
and <http://www.uboat.net/articles/index.html?article=69>



*Artist's impression of U-1021 200 ft (60m) down off Trevoze Head with her bow blown clear off by a mine*



*A British sea mine with spiky detonators. They are a familiar site in UK coastal towns and villages, where many have been converted to more peaceful purposes as collecting vessels for the Shipwrecked Mariners' Society.*