

Fishing Fleet Sunk off Cornwall March 1917

Safety in Numbers – An Illusion

On 24 March 1917, 9 British fishing smacks, *Alice*, *Boy Walter*, *Endeavour*, *Enigma*, *H.C.G.*, *May Flower*, *Qui Vive*, *Reindeer* and *Satanita* were in relatively close proximity fishing in an arc from SE to SSW between 12 and 15 miles from Eddystone Lighthouse. All nine were stopped and scuttled by German submarine *UC17* but fortunately there were no casualties. *Alice* was 61 tons, but the others were between 22 and 43 tons, so all small and defenceless against a submarine, and hailed from around the south of England, from Lowestoft to Porthleven.

At the Admiralty Enquiry (ADM 137/1294 1917), the Master of the *FV Alice* reported that he had been stood on deck at about 4.30pm, and witnessed a German submarine sinking two other fishing vessels, 3 or 4 miles away. There was not enough wind to escape and the *FV Alice* became the next target. The submarine approached and fired two warning shots. The crew were ordered to leave the vessel and go to the submarine. Once alongside, a German crewman boarded and demanded to be rowed out to the *FV Alice* where he attached bombs. Once back at the submarine, the bombs were detonated and the submarine submerged, leaving the crew stranded in their rowing boat. The crew of the *FV Alice* were picked up by the trawler *FV Satanita* at approx. 7.30pm which then fled towards Falmouth. But, the *FV Satanita* had not gone unnoticed. The Submarine surfaced nearby and the same ordeal was repeated. Both crews were finally rescued by *HMT Buffalo* and the accompanying oiler *Osceolia* and landed at Plymouth.

UC17 was a Type UCII Coastal Minelayers class submarine, equipped with 7 torpedoes, 18 UC200 mines and 1 x 88mm deck gun with 133 rounds. Commanded from May 1915 – May 1917 by Oblt. Ralph Wenninger (Pour le Mérite), *UC17* had 4 commanders, Wenninger being the first, and operated out of Flandern Flotilla, then I Flotilla totalling 21 patrols. On 26 November 1918, *UC17* (under the command of Oblt. Freiherr Nikolaus von Lyncker) surrendered and was broken up at Preston in 1919 or 1920.

Wenninger was captured and taken as a prisoner of war on 22 April 1918 when the Uboat he was then in command of, UB 55, hit a mine in the Dover Barrage. The majority of the crew escaped but 8 were found aboard and taken prisoner by the British trawler *Mate*. During the First World War, Wenninger was responsible for the sinking of 97 Merchant Vessels.

Written and researched by MAT volunteer, Roger Burns.

Sources:

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