

Divers solve sunken U-boat mystery

Local divers find U-boat wreck

A World War Two maritime mystery has been solved by two Orkney men.

For Ian Trumpess and Kevin Heath, both from Stromness, are the first people in over 55 years to see the wreck of a German U-boat, which sank in water off Orkney in 1944.

Fifty men perished when the vessel, on her first wartime mission, was gunned down in an air attack. Their bodies are believed still to be on board.



**Diver Ian Trumpess, from Stromness, who captured the submarine on video.
(Picture: Orkney Photographic)**

Thirty-six-year-old Mr Trumpess has dived on the wreck of the submarine U-297 twice in the past few weeks following their discovery 16 miles west of Yesnaby to the west of Orkney.

"There is a number of feelings that go through you - it is exhilarating, the thrill of finding it and knowing I am the first person ever to see it since it went down," he said.

While on a second dive Mr Trumpess took video footage and confirmed the find to the German Embassy and the Ministry of Defence.

Along with wreck researcher and clam boat operator Mr Heath, initial investigations on the Admiralty Chart showed that there was a wreck of some kind in the area.

"Kevin did some digging around and said it could be the wreck of the U-297. She is class 7C-41, the workhorse of-their day."

Four lifeboat canisters spotted along the deck of the vessel distinguished it as being, without a doubt, the class 7C-41 type from a Norwegian flotilla, Mr Heath explained.

The vessel, which had only been in action for one month, was gunned down by a Sunderland aircraft, from 201 Squadron based in Lochearn, late in the afternoon on December 6, 1944.

In a twist to the tale Mr Heath (37), explained that on the morning of December 6 the destroyer escort HMS Bullen was torpedoed off Cape Wrath by the submarine U-775.

"The Sunderland witnessed the Bullen sinking. He also saw two ships the HMS Lochinsh and HMS Goodall laying out patterns of depth charges and they reported having destroyed a submarine."

It was later thought that particular sub had been the U-297.

However, the Sunderland - a flying boat with a crew of 12 under commander Flight Lieutenant D. R. Hatton - continued to patrol this time to the west of Orkney until she spotted the wake of a submarine. On closer inspection the snorkel and periscope were seen.

Mr Heath said: "They came in and launched a depth charge attack from 50ft but that attempt failed and they came in for a second attack. They managed to drop six depth charges at 60ft between each one. Three went into the wake and three went ahead."

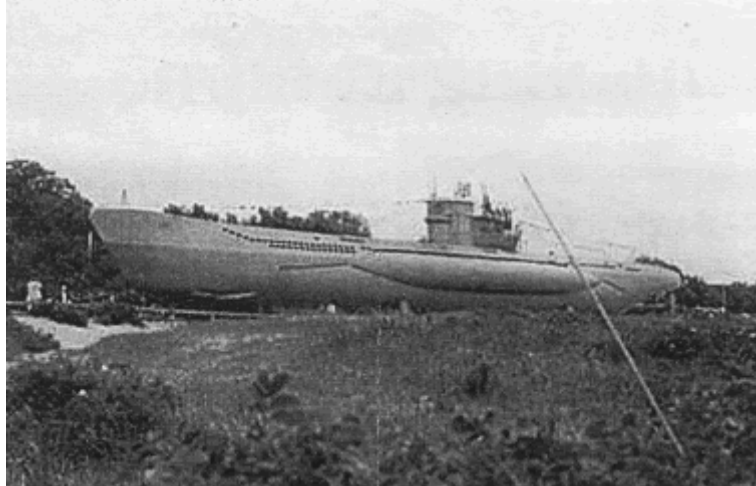
All evidence of a submarine in the area disappeared, until a large patch of oil started spreading over the sea.

At 5.30 pm the Sunderland returned to base.

"For all this time it was believed that the Lochinsh and Goodall destroyed the 297 in the morning in a totally different place. They had actually depth charged another submarine which escaped," Mr Heath added.

The U-297, which never sank anything in her short career, was part of the 11th Flotilla in Norway built in 1943 and under the command of ObLt Wolfgang Aldegarmann.

The submarine's first patrol was with the 8th Training Flotilla in the Baltic, where she remained until October 31, 1944, then joining the 11th Flotilla as a combat boat.



As it would have been: A class 7C-41 submarine similar to the one discovered 16 miles west of Yesnaby.

Mr Heath said: "She was only in action from November 1 to December 6. Her job was to basically hunt shipping. She was out to kill shipping in the AN 15 area, that is the German grid that covers Orkney across to Cape Wrath and north to the Westray Firth."

It was decided that Mr Trumpess, who has been diving since he was 15, would go down to the wreck to investigate.

"A couple of weeks ago we decided to bite the bullet. I got a bottle of helium and got a mix together."

The wreck is lying in 87 metres (280ft) of water which only experienced divers are able to tackle using a carefully calculated mix of helium and oxygen.

"We did a grid search based on the co-ordinates given from the hydrographics."

Amazingly, the men located the submarine within seven minutes.

Mr Trumpess got kitted up and jumped in after marking the exact area of the wreck with a shotline.

It took him more than half an hour to reach the seabed, and what he saw left him speechless.

"It started getting very dark, you know you are getting deep when you are touching 280ft. I settled down on the bottom. I let my vision and my eyes focus in. There was a shadow to my left. I cast my eyes over and saw the wreck."

Stories around Orkney had suggested that it could be the wreck of a freighter, but at a glance Mr Trumpess could see it was not.

"This was no freighter, it was a submarine," he said.

It is also rumoured that a young Orkney man at the time may have witnessed the air attack from the cliffs of Yesnaby. If you are that man the two divers would love to hear from you.

On his "scooter" - a diver propulsion vehicle - Mr Trumpess rode around the wreck, spending 20 minutes exploring a sight never seen before by the human eye.

Although the 66-metre long vessel remains largely intact and in excellent condition it has obviously been damaged in parts.

"On the forward of the conning tower (used by the commander when the vessel is under attack) on the port hand side I noticed four hatches in a row. Later investigations showed this to be of the 7C-41 - no doubt about it."

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He continued: "The winter garden (which holds the anti-aircraft guns) has fallen off and is lying on the starboard side below."

The conning tower hatch is open and the chair where a man would have sat lies empty.

The lower hatch is shut tight, as are all the others suggesting the vessel went down quickly with no chance of escape.

"It seems most likely that the snorkel broke off letting in tonnes of water," Mr Heath said. "Initially there would have been absolute panic and horror and they were obviously given no alarm as they would have attempted to crash dive, but they took no action."

The entire dive took Mr Trumpess 103 minutes - much longer than it would have taken for the vessel to sink.

"Hopefully it would've been over quickly for them," Mr Heath, who started researching the wreck a year ago, added.

The men are planning to take another trip out to sea for a third dive to get more video footage.

And Mr Trumpess says he has considered salvaging a lifeboat canister lying away from the submarine.



The lifeboat canisters on the deck of the vessel which prove beyond doubt that the wreck is a German U-boat class7C-41.

"It is a brass one with an orange lifeboat inside. I have been toying with the idea of salvaging it and giving it to Lyness Wartime Museum in Hoy. But I don't know where I would stand legally and in any case if it is declared a war grave it shouldn't be touched. It should be given the respect it deserves."

The men are waiting to get a crew list and hopefully photos of the men from the Ministry of Defence.

But Mr Trumpess warned looting divers to stay away.

"There are certain groups of divers that come up to Orkney and loot. I would be very upset if that happened here, but I have video footage that shows everything that is there."

The wreck is now in addition to those already lying in Orkney waters. Britain's greatest soldier, Lord Kitchener, died on the cruiser HMS Hampshire, sunk by mines off Orkney's west coast in 1916. There was tragedy again in 1939 when the German submarine U-47 slipped through the incomplete defences to sink the British battleship HMS Royal Oak with the loss of over 800 lives.

And between the wars arguably the world's greatest feat of salvage - the raising of the scuttled German fleet - was carried out in Orkney waters.

According to the German wartime film Das Boot, Hitler sent out 40,000 men aboard German U-boats during World War Two. Less than 10,000 returned.

They are far from finished in their quest to find more wrecks, of which there are hundreds more out there, they say.

"This is just the beginning, we definitely hope to find more wrecks out there," the two divers agreed.