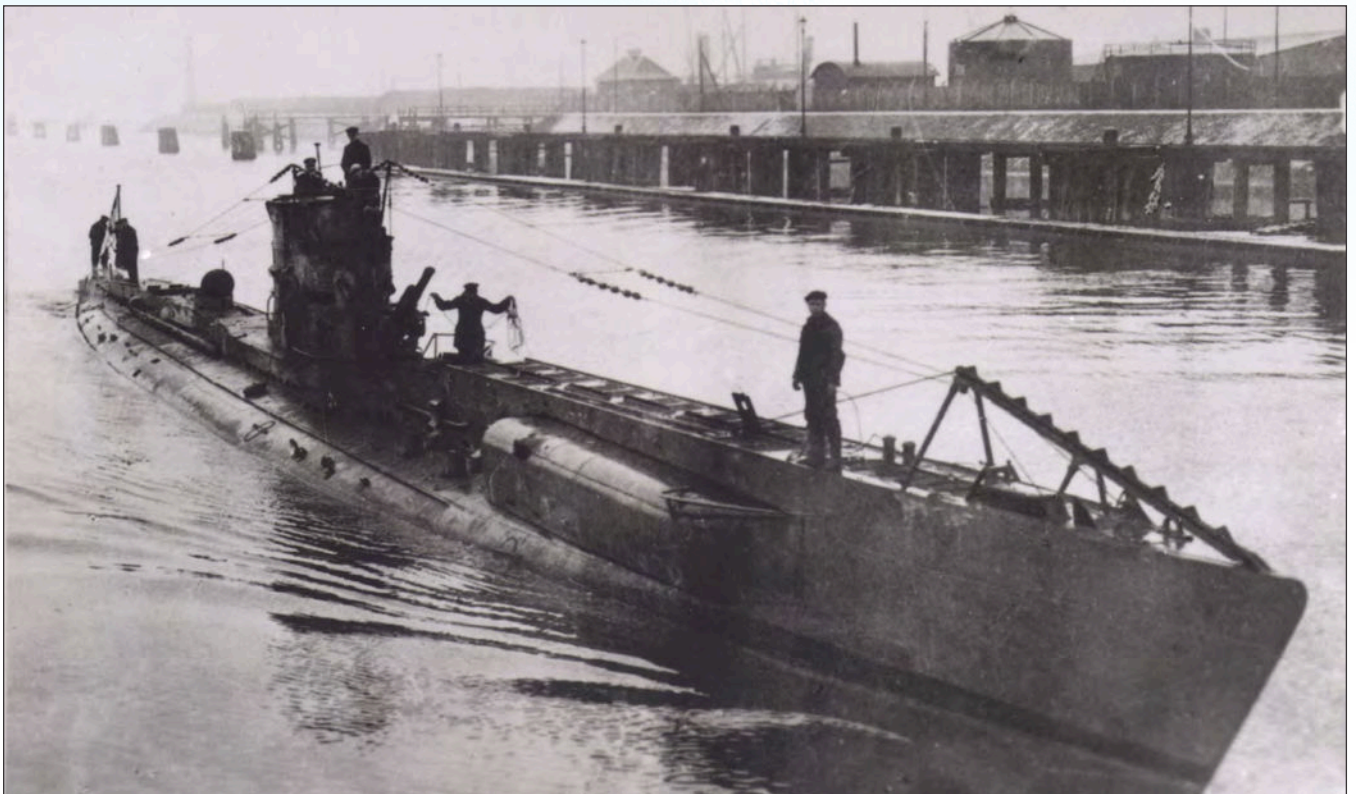


Back to the Light: The Mysterious Sinking of *UC-71*

By Florian Huber, Ph.D.



*UC-71: the 53m-long U-boat had a crew of 26 and could dive to 50 meters.
(Courtesy of Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte Stuttgart)*

DURING World War I, the German Imperial Navy deployed the U-boat SM *UC-71* to the North Sea, the English Channel, and the Bay of Biscay; she sank in February 1919 during a routine transit to England. For almost 100 years, the sub rested about one kilometer south of the German archipelago Heligoland in about 22 m of water. In the summer of 2016, after two years of preparation, underwater archaeologists salvaged the submarine's net cutter, which will be exhibited in the newly-constructed Heligoland Museum as evidence of the exciting history of the submarine.

THE U-BOAT *UC-71*

The *UC-71* conducted a total of 19 enemy patrols under five commanders during World War I, sinking 61 civilian ships, including the well-known English U-boat trap HMS *Dunraven*. Following the Armistice, the U-boat was to be delivered to the Allies, but during transit to England, she sank on February 20, 1919, immediately adjacent to the southern entrance to the North Sea island of Heligoland. In a telegram sent by the captain dated February 26, bad weather and high waves were the cause of the loss.





F. Huber

The net cutter is astonishingly well preserved. After the initial, rough clean, the original grey coat of paint began to show through the layer of corrosion.

Due to her extraordinary fate and special construction, the U-boat is of particular value to military, naval, scientific, and technical researchers. At the request of the author, the wreck was declared a protected monument by the Schleswig-Holstein Archaeological Office in 2012.

INVESTIGATION OF THE WRECK

The successful identification of the wreck of UC-71 in 2001 was due to a private initiative in collaboration with the Alfred Wegener Institute (AWI). An initial inventory of the wreck was also performed at the time. In July 2014, a research diving company named Submaris conducted an extensive photo and video documentation to record the state of conservation. An ultrasonic thickness gauge measured the thickness of the outer and pressure hull; though the original thickness of the bow was measured at 11 mm, the survey discovered that the residual strength was only 4.3 mm. However, the wreck is still extremely well preserved overall.

One reason for this is its location within a nature reserve in which diving and fishing are prohibited.

The underwater archaeological investigations also revealed that the submarine was obviously scuttled. During the first dives in 2001, it was established that only the tower hatch was tightly



U. Kunz

The scientific divers of Submaris after the successful salvage in Heligoland Harbor (from the left): Robert Lehmann, Christian Howe, Florian Huber, Philipp Schubert, and Uli Kunz.





U. Kunz

The net cutter lay roughly five meters from the bow area; it was likely torn off during scuttling.

locked; the remaining two hatches on the upper deck were open. In 2014, during the documentation of the sub's interior, all doors and bulkheads were found open. This contradicts what was reported in the 1919 telegram; namely, that all the hatches and bulkheads had been closed. This discrepancy clearly documents that this was a deliberate scuttling, which was masked under a pretext of bad weather.

The scuttling of *UC-71* recalls the events of Scapa Flow. Here, too, on July 21, 1919, German warships were sunk by their own crews to prevent their being handed over to the Allies as reparations.

THE SALVAGING OF THE NET CUTTER

Net cutters were designed to cut submarine nets, which hung like curtains in the Strait of Dover as well as in all the English river mouths and port entrances. These nets often included mines which were directed or driven away from the U-boat by two steel cables attached to the end of a saw running in parallel from the bow over the tower to the end of the stern. Sometimes the net cutter would be supported by a second, directly-welded saw tooth below the bow.

The *UC-71*'s 4.1m-long and almost 200-kg net cutter was recovered in the summer of 2016 using lift bags and an electric winch; it was then transported to the State Museum at Schloss Gottorf in Schleswig, Germany. At the central archaeological workshop there, the net cutter was laid in a basin with demineralized water, where it will be desalinated

and preserved for the next two years. It will then be put on display in Heligoland in the newly designed museum. The fate of *UC-71* and the naval war of 1914 to 1918 will be shown in a virtual exhibition which will include the net cutter, the recently rediscovered diary of the fourth machinist of the *UC-71*, Georg Trinks, as well as footage and further historical documentation.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WORLD WAR WRECKS

According to UNESCO, there are around 10,000 World War I shipwrecks. These wrecks—as well as those of World War II—are complex archaeological sites. Some of these wrecks are well preserved, but the majority have been severely damaged or destroyed by commercial salvaging, plundering, scrapping, or ground trawling. And although the wrecks are witnesses to two of the greatest conflicts of recent history, they have not been sufficiently studied. The wrecks of World War I are particularly significant historically as they represent the state of the art in shipbuilding in the early 20th century. The protection of these underwater sites is also essential to the memorialization of the horrors of global conflict and those who were lost to it. Since 2014, the cultural heritage of World War I has been under UNESCO's Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.

Photos and articles on the U-boat and two TV documentaries (in German) can be found at: www.florian-huber.info

