

The Historical Archaeology of World War I U-boats and the Compilation of Admiralty History: The Case of (UC-79)

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Over the course of the last 17 years the author has researched, dived, surveyed and identified some 100 submarine wrecks around the UK. His 2014 book examines the 63 known U-boat wrecks in the English Channel, of which 32 were sunk during World War I. Detailed analysis of each case revealed that the list of U-boat losses published by the Antisubmarine Division (ASD) of the Admiralty in 1919 (the 1919 List) was only 48 per cent accurate. Of the wrecks not mentioned in the 1919 List, (*UC-79*) is the most startling case, primarily because ASD knew where it was during wartime but hid its true fate when it compiled the 1919 List in order to preserve its own reputation. This paper examines why this happened and what its broader implications are for archaeologists, historians and heritage managers.

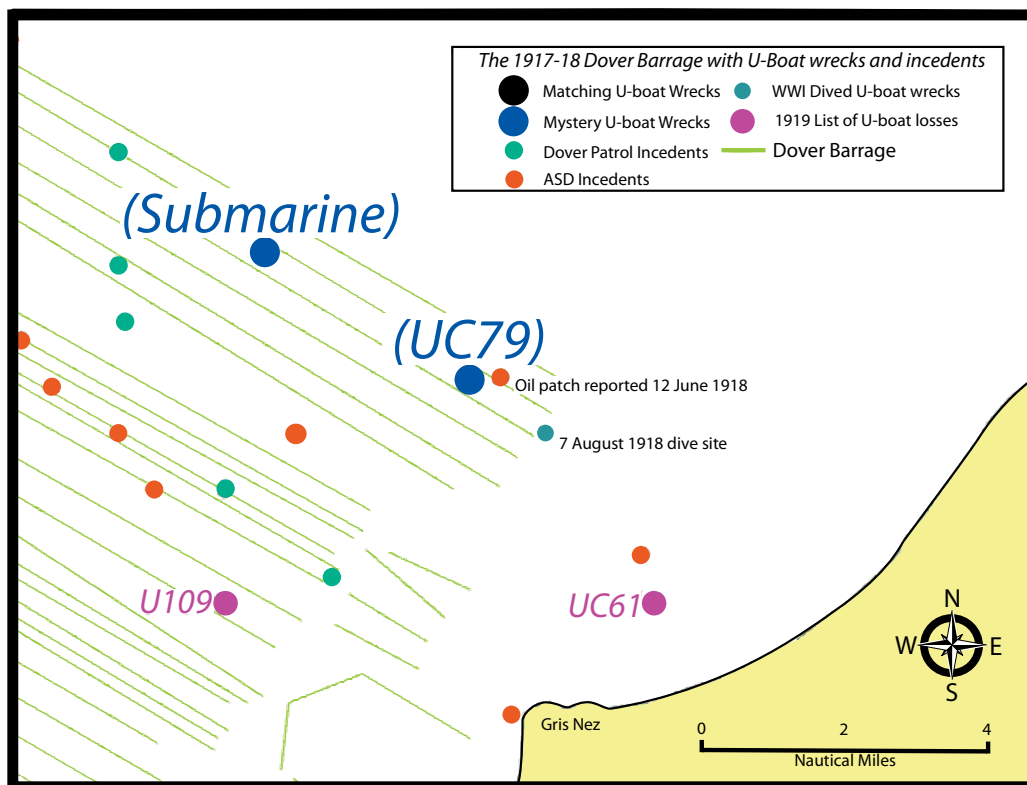


Figure 1. Map showing the location of the wreck of (UC79) in the Dover Barrage and the related oil patch and 1918 diving site. Nearby wrecks and incidents are also shown © Innes McCartney.

In 2000, on a tip-off from a local fisherman, French divers found the wreck of a U-boat off Gris-Nez in the Dover Straits (Figure 1). During subsequent dives it was found to be of the UCII-Class of minelaying U-boat, mined in the Dover Barrage (a large minefield laid in 1917-18 to close the Dover Straits to U-boats). Both of its propellers were scraped in an attempt to reveal the identity of the wreck. This methodology can be 100 per cent successful, leading to an unassailable identification of a U-boat wreck, if both propellers match and the result coalesces with supportive historical evidence. Not unusually, in this case the propellers did not match, leading to an inconclusive result. The port side propeller was stamped 'UC79' and starboard side 'UC77', raising the possibility that one, or even both propellers had been substituted during the U-boat's operational life.

In consultation with the divers, the historian Michael Lowrey deduced that wreck must be (*UC-79*), which left for its last patrol on 20 March 1918. Figure 1 shows that the location of the wreck is very close to where a patch of oil was first spotted by airship on 12 June 1918. Since *UC-77* was operational until July 1918 it seems that it can be discounted as a candidate for this wreck site. This means that *UC-79* remains by far the best probable identity for the wreck. But it is yet to be fully confirmed, with *UC-78* also being a potential candidate, unaccounted for as a wreck elsewhere. For this reason the wreck's identity is cited in parentheses, a probable but unconfirmed identification.

According to ASD's 1919 List, *UC-79* was confidently attributed with being destroyed by the British submarine HMS *E-45* on 19 October 1917 in the southern North Sea. However, an examination of the details of the attack reveals that all that was witnessed was in fact a 'great disturbance of water', with no supportive physical evidence seen. This would appear then, to be a somewhat dubious attribution, if it was not for the fact that ASD thought it knew from radio intelligence that *UC-79* was in the same area as HMS *E-45* at the time of its attack. So seemingly confident was ASD about the success of this attack that *UC-79* was removed from its daily plot and listed as sunk, never to be reinstated. We now know that in fact it was *U-53* that was attacked (ASD had most probably confused its callsign with that of *UC-79*) and it survived to report the incident in its war diary.

Of course ASD could not have known this, but it was not too long before the inconvenient truth that *UC-79* was still operational began to emerge. The first signs must have come from the Admiralty's cryptographic branch, Room 40, whose own history sheet for *UC-79* shows that by February 1918 it knew that the U-boat was still operational. Although it may have been easy for ASD to ignore the views of a few intelligence officers, more bothersome was the discovery of the wreck of (*UC-79*) by Admiralty divers on 7 August 1918.

Figure 2 shows the telegram sent by Commander Damant of the Admiralty Salvage Section, who was detailed to work for the Naval Intelligence Division during the summer of 1918, to find U-boat wrecks from which to gather intelligence. It describes the condition and state of the wreck and this matches well with the position of the wreck found in 2000 (Figure 1). The author

surveyed the wreck site in the summer of 2014; the results are shown in Figure 3, the wreck is broken in half as Damant described. The forward section is blown off and lies on its port side, the stern section is upright. The two halves are almost touching on the starboard side. The key features on site are labelled as follows. Image A shows that the forward section is blown off at the point where it bisects mine chute six. All the mine chutes are in fact empty. The U-boat's stern portion points north, suggesting the U-boat was destroyed in the Dover minefield while heading back to Flanders at the end of its

patrol. Image B shows one of the two external forward torpedo tubes. Both are present on the wreck site, with doors sealed shut. Image C shows the view into the stern section which would have confronted Damant's divers in 1918. It shows the underneath of the pressure hull folded upwards by the mine blast, creating only a tiny aperture through which no diver in 1918 could have safely entered the wreck. It clearly shows the wreck struck a mine underneath chute six. Image D shows the extreme bow of the wreck showing the angle of lean of the forward section. Image E shows the forward portion of the conning tower revealing the steering pillar for the bridge helm to still be in place. Image F shows a view of the conning tower seen from above. The hatch is opened, as described in Damant's telegram. Image G shows the shut engine hatch. All are shut except the conning tower hatch seen in Image F. Image H shows the starboard side propellor. Both are still present and still clear of the seabed.

The presence of this wreck caused a problem for ASD in the fact that no witnessed incident could be found to plausibly explain its presence in the

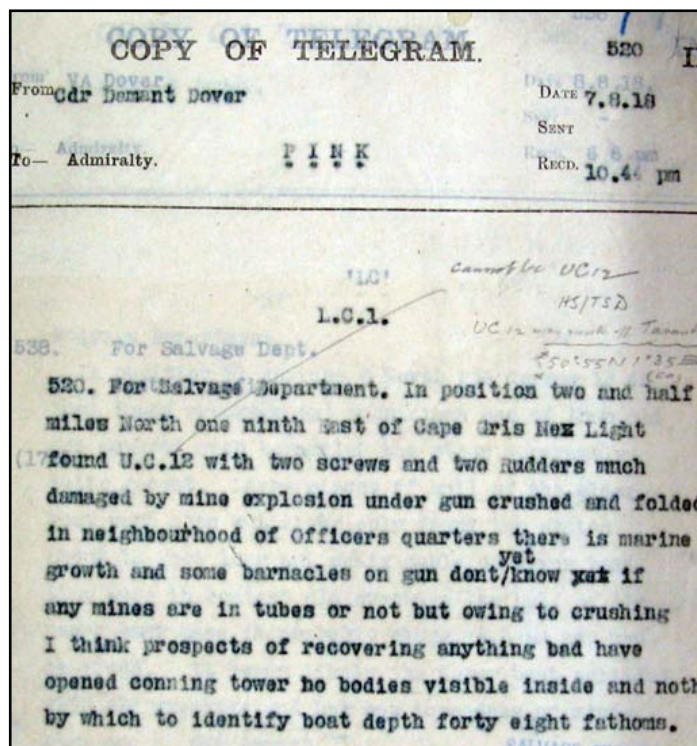


Figure 2. Commander Damant's telegram describing the discovery of (UC79) in August 1918. The attribution to "UC12" is most probably a typographic error, with Damant meaning that a UCII type had been found. © Crown Copyright

Name: (UC79) Posn: 50 54.983; 01 34.419E Depth: 35m
 Date of Loss: Mar-May 1918 How Sunk: Mine
 Date of Survey: 20 July 2014

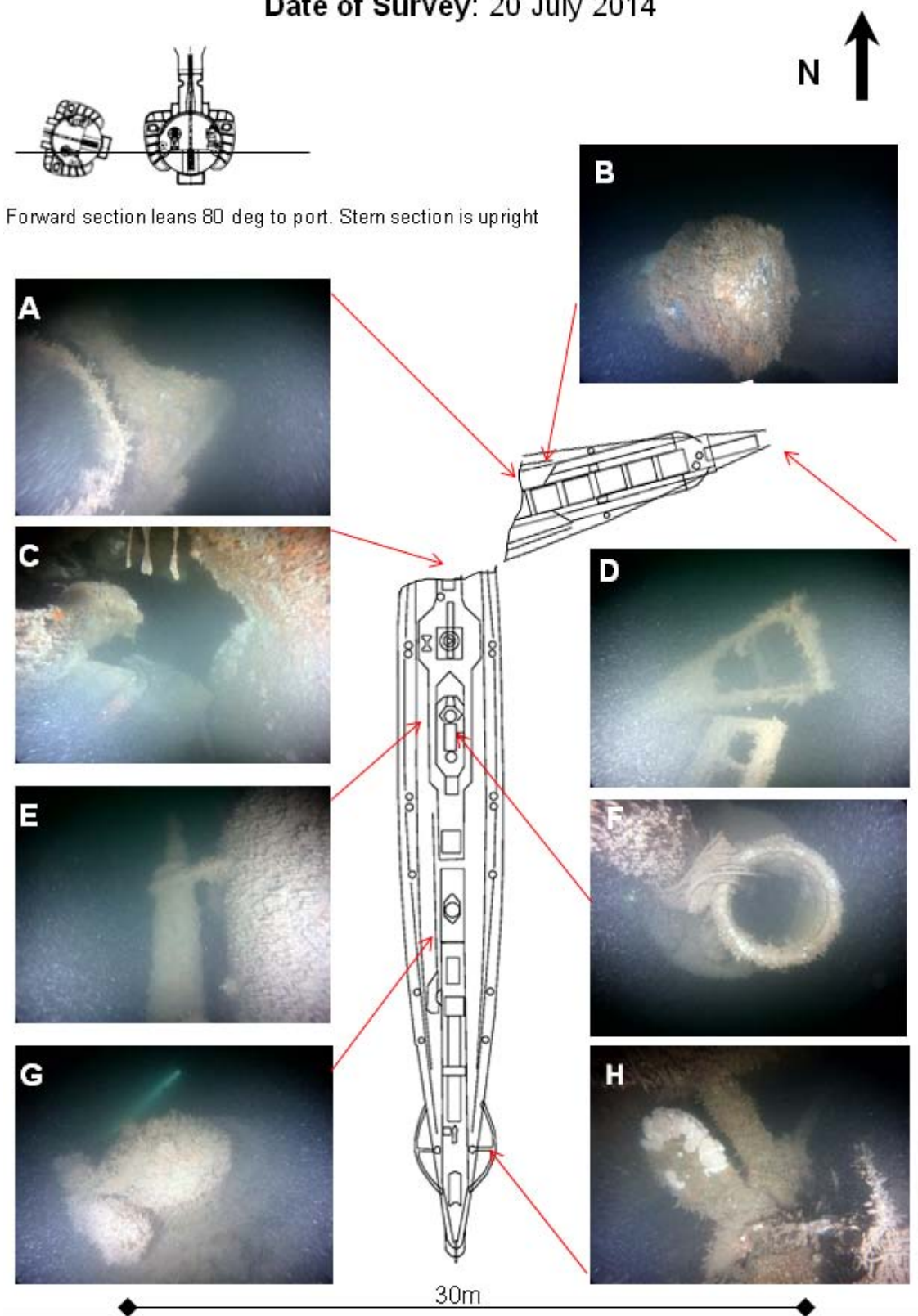


Figure 3. Site map of the wreck of (UC79) as surveyed by the author on 20 July 2014 © Innes McCartney

minefield before the 12 June sighting of oil. In an attempt to date when the U-boat was sunk, Damant's divers recovered a piece of "tin" sheet from the wreck and it was sent to the British Museum so that the barnacle growth could be dated (Figure 4). This is certainly an early case of such a forensic approach being used in wartime. The results of the museum's analysis led to the conclusion that the U-boat was sunk in March to May 1918. The problem was that this conflicted with ASD's view that it had already successfully accounted for all of the UCII minelayers which had been lost during this period and awkwardly, none fitted this scenario.

ASD's weakest assertion was seemingly that of *UC-78*, considered mined in the Dover Barrage. In this instance its supposed destruction had not yielded survivors or other identifying material, but the witnessed mine explosion made for a very good case. Parenthetically, in 1982 a wreck was found by divers at the position given in 1918 for the loss of *UC-78* and it ironically turned out to be *UB-78*, leaving *UC-78* without a verified recorded fate to this day, making it a theoretical albeit unlikely candidate for this wreck. Of course ASD knew that Room 40 had shown that *UC-79* had survived its encounter with HMS *E-45* the previous October and was still operational.

Ultimately then, ASD must have concluded that in all likelihood the wreck found on 7 August 1918 had to be *UC-79*, confirming Room 40's suspicions that the U-boat was still operational. Since February 1918 the intelligence appreciation as to *UC-79*'s operational status had been strengthened by U-boat survivor interrogations which showed that *UC-79* was last seen around April 1918. Unbeknownst to ASD *UC-79* had actually departed on its final patrol on



Figure 4. How ASD's attribution for the loss of UC79 unravelled (left to right): Commander Damant, whose divers located the wreck of (UC79) off Gris Nez in August 1918 (R. H. Davis), the barnacled tin sheet which dated the time of loss of UC79 (National Archives) and Paymaster Lieutenant-Commander William F. Clarke RNVR, the Room 40 intelligence officer who revealed how ASD manipulated the historic record to its advantage © Crown Copyright

20 March. It seems therefore that ASD could only realistically have concluded that the wreck was *UC-79*.

The problem was that it had already listed it as destroyed. So how could it now be resurrected?

The answer is that it simply was not. Of all of the U-boat wrecks known to have been surveyed by Salvage Section divers, this case is the only one in which the actual physical presence of a destroyed U-boat was simply (and conveniently) ignored when ASD compiled the 1919 List. Therein the fate of *UC-79* is described as being sunk by HMS E45 in October 1917, even though ASD clearly knew that this was not true.

Such a bold assertion about how official Admiralty texts were compiled, made by an archaeologist, would seem to require some alternative form of substantiation, ideally from within the Admiralty. It was found in the unpublished papers of W. F. Clarke, Room 40 Intelligence Officer and latterly Deputy Head of the Naval Section at Bletchley Park in WW2 (Figure 4) who wrote in his unpublished memoirs that:

The Anti Submarine Division ... had frequently to boost their own efforts, insisted on the success of many attacks that we in Room 40 knew to have been abortive and many officers had received decorations in consequence; when these very gallant men put in their claims for prize bounty, it was my none too pleasant task to turn down their claims.

ASD, constituted in December 1916 to combat the growing U-boat menace, seems to have been as interested in maintaining its reputation as in compiling an accurate and impartial record of U-boat losses. This is most probably the explanation for how such an obviously inaccurate attribution of a U-boat loss passed into the 1919 List and thence into published history. The obvious confusion with U53's callsign was uncovered by the historian Arno Spindler in the 1930's, and left *UC-79* without a recorded fate until the wreck was located in 2000. The question remains though, how many other cases, similar to this still lie in the historical lists of U-boat losses in WW1 waiting to be uncovered as more U-boat wrecks are identified in the future? And moreover how does this affect the lists of the thousands of ships sunk by U-boats in WW1?

The author's latest research published this year has uncovered other cases which can also quite clearly be interpreted in a similar manner. Alongside them are an innumerable accompaniment of obvious mistakes and oversights which do much to support the historian Arthur Marder's assertion that the lack of a Naval Staff College at this time in Britain's history produced 'merely a nondescript collection of officers ... as ignorant of the principles of staff work as they were

of strategy and operations.’ Parenthetically it took recreational divers nearly a century to show that there is more than a grain of truth in those words.

Ultimately then, where does this leave the heritage manager tasked under Article 22 of the Convention to inventory the underwater cultural heritage in their portion of the seas? It would seem that in the case of U-boats and therefore also among an unknown number of their thousands of victims, the original historical texts should be treated with caution. Alongside this realisation is the fact that many types of shipwrecks can be difficult to identify.

In both instances, a system to differentiate the verified identity of a wreck from a theoretical identification may prove useful. The author has devised the bracketing system in use in this paper and his other published works to function in this way. Aside from cases where known shipwrecks very obviously match the historical texts, there will be others that are not so easily resolved. In those cases it may be better to trust what emerges from the archaeological record of surveyed wreck sites, for it would appear shipwrecks have a lesser propensity to lie.



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