



Conningtower porthole and wiper



Open hatch



Port screw U12

A Sublime Dive

The discovery of the German submarine

U12 in the Firth of Forth recently caused a

big stir in Scottish diving circles. Mike

Clark was determined to find out what all

the fuss was about ...

EARLIER THIS YEAR Martin Sinclair and Jim Macleod, a couple of enterprising divers got together with Eyemouth skippers Jim and Iain Easingood of Marinequest, who run the dive boat *North Star*. They all had a long held wish to find the wreck of the German submarine U12. In January this year they found it after five years of searching. Three and a half months later, on the second trip out to this new wreck, I had booked my place on *North Star* and was eagerly awaiting the chance to descend down to the wreck.

On the long way out to the wreck, 18 miles out of Eyemouth, I took the chance to ask Iain, our skipper for today about the wreck and its history. I had seen pictures of this early U-boat. It was unusual in the fact that this submarine carried a floatplane on the deck of the sub. The plane would be launched on the sighting of a target and sent to investigate.

I would not like to have been that pilot. If the sub could not surface, ditching in the cold North Sea would be a frightening prospect. This was never intended to be the case though, as once the aircraft was launched from the sub and its observations were complete, it would head directly back to Germany. The float plane idea was only used a couple of times before being shelved.

The History

U12 is a historically important U-boat, as already said she carried an aircraft on her deck, which could be deployed at sea.

U12 was the first ever submarine to do this. U12 was also the sister ship of the U9 which under the command of Captain Lieutenant Otto Weddingen on September 22, 1914 sank three British light cruisers *HMS Aboukir*, *Hogue*, and *Cressy* in under 75 minutes. U9 was instantly famous and survived the war. Her sister ship U 12 did not and when she had her run in with three British destroyers *HMS Ariel*, *Acheron* and *Attack* it would be the British that were victorious on that day.

The day before the battle U12 was seen on the surface by a trawler and this news was eventually reported to the destroyers that were hunting her along with the light cruiser *HMS Fearless*. U12 did not wait around to be found and carried on her deadly business sending a steamship to the bottom in the outer Firth of Forth. The screen of destroyers, which had been sweeping the east coast of Scotland moved toward her newly reported position, then they saw the sub on the surface.

U12 saw the destroyers coming and crash-dived to 25 metres, readying two of her four torpedo tubes for use. Kapitänleutnant Hans Kratzsch may have seen the opportunity to emulate Captain Lieutenant Otto Weddingen, Germany's U-boat hero, by sinking his own three British warships. On this occasion though, the destroyers were aware of the presence of a Uboat in the area.

Kapitänleutnant Hans Kratzsch gave the order to come to periscope depth,

there was an ear splitting crash as the periscope was blown clean off the conning tower. Seconds later the bows of *HMS Ariel* rammed U12 on the port side just forward of the conning tower. The sub rolled over 90 degrees and was forced under. Ballast tanks were blown and when the sub surfaced the destroyers shelled her. 10 men managed to escape the sub, 19 of their comrades were not so lucky as the conning tower hatch jammed. U12 had come to periscope depth when *HMS Ariel* was almost on top of her. U12 and 19 of her crew paid the ultimate price.

Now she lies on the sea floor 47 metres down. A remaining survivor of a very famous class of submarine, that makes a fantastic dive for a wreck diver.

The Dive

The run out to the wreck site aboard the *North Star* had been relatively quick. Conditions were good, flat calm seas and sunny skies. It was a perfect mid May day. The water above the site was a strange turquoise blue colour. Being 18 miles off the coast underwater visibility was expected to be excellent but on this day a plankton bloom had started, due to the weeks of good weather leading up to the dive and this was the cause of the strange colour of the water.

Dropping down the shotline the water was bright and clear until we passed through the 30 metre barrier where it turned dark. I turned on my torch as I neared the bottom. Viz was around six metres and the shot had landed in the sand just forward of the conning tower.

I immediately noted a brass porthole with its windscreen wiper. The glass reflecting my torch beam. The unique pattern of portholes on the conning tower was one of the details used to identify this wreck.

A party of divers headed off to the right, so I followed the hull to the left. Soon old nets appeared, wrapped around the wreck. I felt I had finned a long way from the conning tower and as I was just thinking that I must be finning towards the stern when the twin brass screws appeared at the back of the boat.

This was quite a find for me, as I had never seen intact screws on a U-boat before. This was an early class of boat and I was surprised at how small the screws were. The power plants that drove the screws were two stoke engines fuelled by paraffin.

Unbeknown to me above my head, whilst I was taking pictures of the screws, were to be found the twin stern torpedo tubes. This was the other unique identifying feature that confirmed this wreck was U12. I wish I had looked at more old photographs of U 12 before I dived her. The design of the two stern tubes was quite unusual, being at surface level when the boat was on the surface, rather than being submerged further down the hull, as you might expect.

I certainly would have liked to have had a look at this unusual feature of the wreck, especially when I saw an image of said area. One picture in particular was showing a nice big lobster that had set up home in the tube, with one of the readied torpedoes that Kapitänleutnant Hans Kratzsch didn't manage to fire on the day of the battle. Reports published in the *New York Times* at the time however confirm that Kratzsch did manage to fire one of his fish even though he had lost all sight above the surface with the loss of his periscope.

I now finned on under the stern and back up to deck level keeping just away from the nets. I soon came across the hatch at the stern section, which was open. Schools of bib and pollack passed by the hatch unafraid of the nets that were wrapped hard into the wreck at this point.

Further forward the outline of the conning tower soon took shape again and I noted more brass portholes and their wipers. I wondered about their effectiveness even when used on the surface. The hatch on top of the conning tower was fully open, once again surrounded by fish. This didn't concur with the reports of the sinking, which stated that the hatch had partly jammed. Perhaps a snagged net at some time had ripped it open. Or perhaps wartime



Grey seal in Eyemouth Harbour

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Hydrophone and net



U12 deco stops

divers looking for information visited the wreck.

There were certainly no remains of the periscopes, which confirms they were shot off. Finning further forward, my computer now beeping, I passed the port side of the conning tower and did note a distortion in the hull where *Ariel's* bows had rammed the boat.

I eventually reached the bow where the other two torpedo tubes were visible. Martin later suggested that this might mean that the prow of the *Uboat* lies broken off just forward from the main wreck. That's certainly something for exploration for another day.

The forward hatch on this section of the wreck is also open and once again fish are plentiful. It is also at this section of the wreck that two large brass hydrophones can be seen although one is partially obscured by the net.

I was very happy with the dive as I headed towards the shotline. U12 is a fantastic dive with so many artefacts on display. As U12 is a war grave the diving on the wreck was carried out with the utmost respect. The wreck was not entered and nothing was removed from the site.

A week later I caught up with Martin and got some more details about the wreck. I was told a good wee story about one of the survivors of U12 - war pilot Volker. He managed to escape from his prisoner of war camp and made his way to Hull where he gained employment as an able-bodied seaman, on the Swedish bark *Ironstrop*.

On October 1, 1915 *Ironstrop* was stopped and searched by U16. This was excellent news for Volker who completed his escape by boarding U16. He was then assigned the role of war pilot for U44 but he did not manage to see out the war. He went down with U44 when it was sunk on August 12, 1917.



A very happy Mike decompressing after diving the U12

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