

The "Battle" of May Island

In the evening of January 1918, the Royal Navy chose to conduct an exercise codenamed EC1 which started from the navy base at Rosyth. The plan involved a number of battleships, cruisers and destroyers in two groups sailing out towards the North Sea.

Nine K-class submarines were included in the plan and when the whole fleet was at sea, it would stretch out over twenty miles. U-Boat activity was suspected in the area so orders had been issued to conceal external lights while maintaining radio silence. It should have been a fairly routine training exercise but it didn't turn out that way.

The age of the 'K' Class steam powered submarine, originally designed in 1913, had arrived and would gain notoriety in waters close to the coastline of Fife. Elsewhere, it was known as the 'Kalamity' class on account of many accidents and large loss of life. Of the eighteen boats built and commissioned, none were lost as a result of enemy actions with six lost in accidents. Only one ever engaged an enemy vessel when it rammed a U-Boat after a torpedo had failed to explode.

In terms of performance, diving a 'K' class submarine was a complex process and where the funnels had to be retracted and the boilers extinguished. About sixteen different hatches needed to be secured before diving, typically taking about five minutes or more to achieve. During Operation EC1 and close to the Isle of May in the Forth Estuary, every drawback of the design was revealed, and many lives were lost without a single shot being fired in anger or defence. It was an event concealed from public scrutiny for many years and referred to as the 'Battle of May Island' but the enemy was never involved.

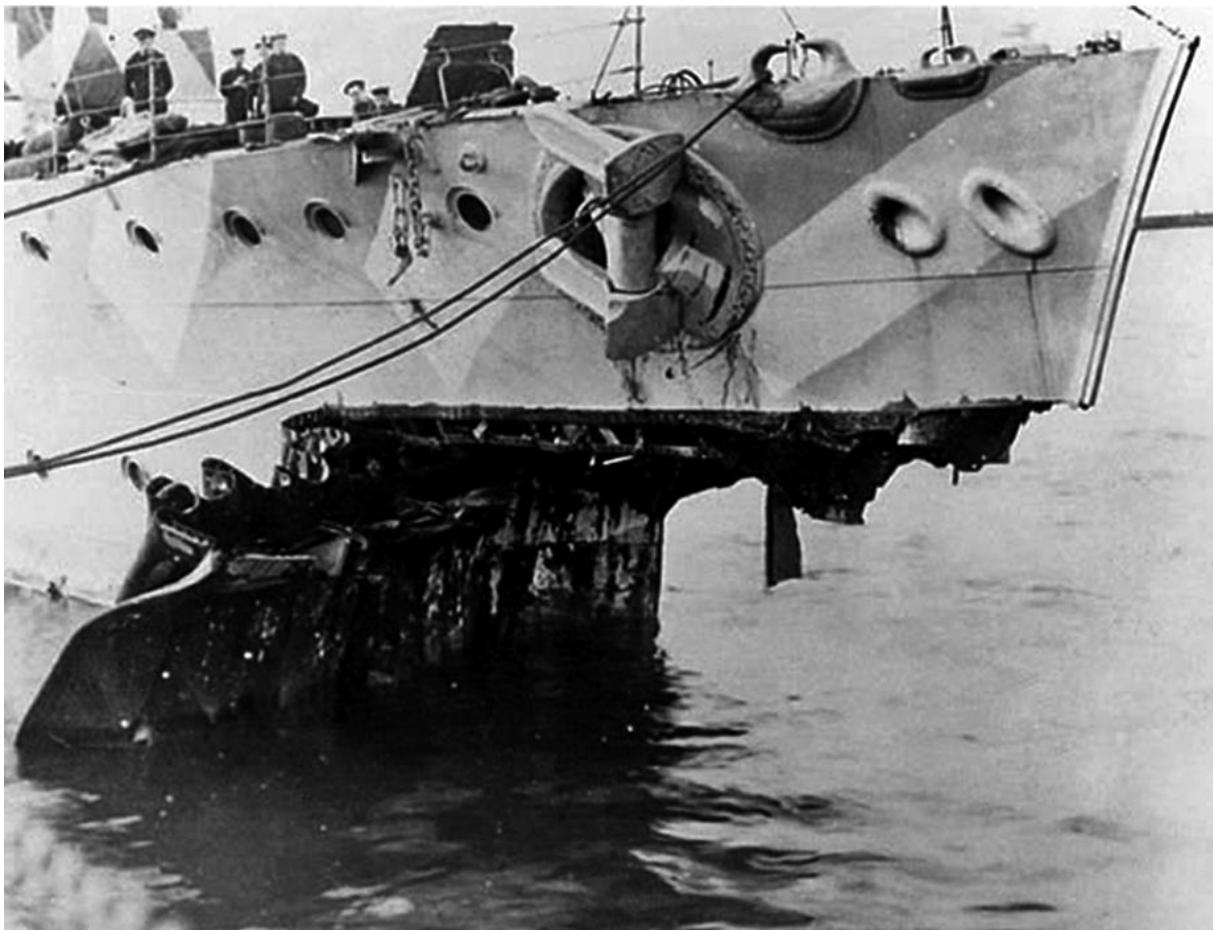
The K-class submarines were large on account of their boilers and need to carry coal. They were about 320 feet long and as the first flotilla of K-boats approached the mouth of the estuary, near the Isle of May, they became aware of a group of minesweepers ahead of them. The Captain of K11, sailing with this first group, spotted several small minesweepers sailing out from the Fife port of Anstruther as fog descended and ordered a reduction in speed and a turn to port. K17 did likewise but K14 only became aware of the danger when two of the minesweepers emerged from fog and were seen to be heading across his bow. Only then did the captain of the K14 realise that K17 had turned and in order to avoid a collision, he ordered full right rudder. This action took the vessel clear of both minesweepers and the nearby K12 but the helm of K14 then jammed in the full right rudder condition. K14 was thus forced into the path of K22 which was still running ahead at 22 knots. Collision was unavoidable and K22 sliced into K14 just aft of the forward torpedo room.

Immediate disaster was averted by the rapid closure of watertight doors but both vessels were now locked together and stationary in the path of the following warships, which, although unseen, were now bearing down on them. Navigation lights were quickly switched on and flares fired. The radio silence order was ignored and requests for help sent out.

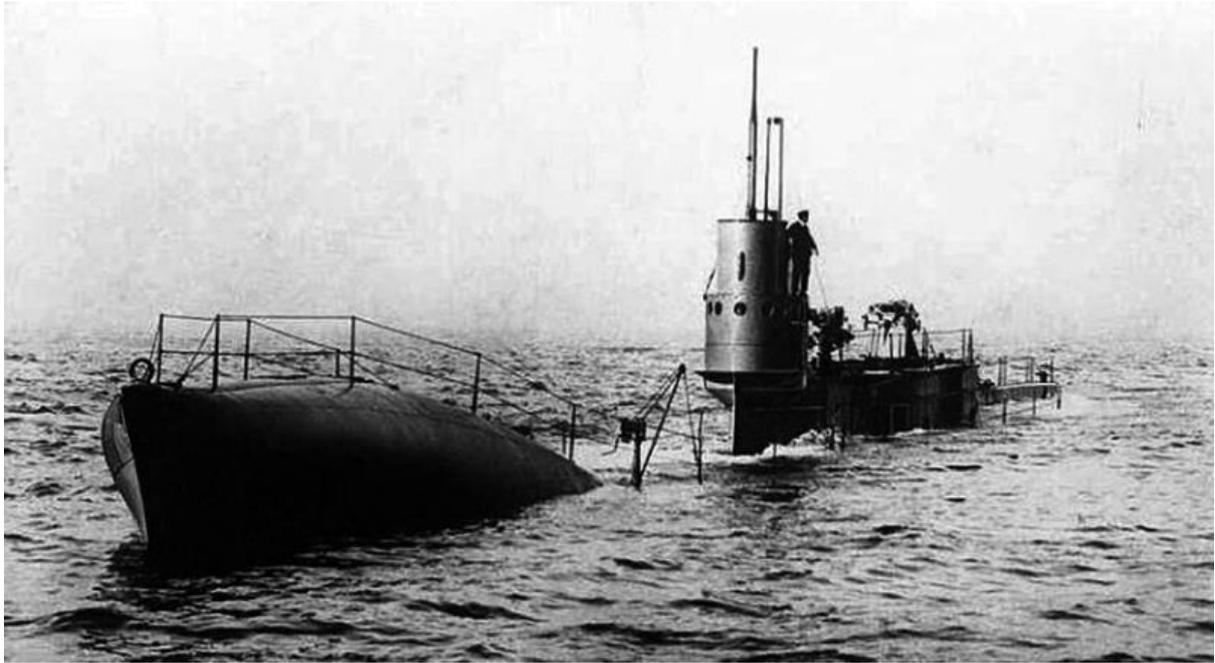
Three large battlecruisers sailed safely past, their near proximity creating a wash which rocked the stricken submarines violently. HMS *Inflexible*, however, was sailing closely behind and rode over the stricken K22, her weight pushing the submarine underneath her hull. As *Inflexible* continued on her way and faded into the mist, K22 resurfaced with thirty feet of her already damaged bow now twisted at right angles to the remainder of the hull and one of her ballast tanks completely sheared off.

Cries for help were acted on by other ships of the first flotilla with several reversing course and heading back into the Firth of Forth. In doing so, their actions created a new hazard in that ships from the first flotilla were now heading westwards on a collision course with ships from the second flotilla sailing eastwards.

The leading ship of the second flotilla was HMS *Fearless*. She had passed clear of the Isle of May at 7.54pm and her captain, judging from initial radio reports, estimated the position of the crash as just one and a half miles from the island. He decided that he was past the danger area and ordered an increase in speed to twenty-one knots. He remained ignorant and unaware that ships from the first group had reversed course and were headed directly towards the second group. Both fleets met head-on at a point some thirteen miles east of the Isle of May at 8.32pm. HMS *Fearless* collided with K17, the bows neatly slicing into the submarine's hull just forward of the conning tower. K17 began to sink and the crew abandoned her. Eight minutes later, K17 submerged for the last time.



The damage sustained by HMS Fearless after ramming K17.



K17.



K4 after running aground on Walney Island in January 1917.

Under normal circumstances, the crew had every chance of being rescued since they were surrounded by many ships but things were far from normal. K4, which had been sailing closely behind HMS Fearless, now turned to port with a view to picking up survivors. K3, sailing just behind K4 attempted to emulate this manoeuvre, turned to port and stopped some distance further on.

K12 now entered the arena. She had been part of the first flotilla which had reversed course and, at one point in time, had narrowly averted collision with the outbound cruiser *Australia*. In fact, the vessels had passed so closely that crewmen on the larger vessel had been able to look down into the submarine's funnels and see the fires glowing below! Her sudden appearance near to the collision zone immediately caused alarm on board K6 which was still heading eastward as part of the second group. K6 swerved to avoid colliding with K12 but collided with K4 instead and almost sliced her in half.

K6 was impaled and stuck firm on the rapidly sinking wreck of K4 and it seemed that K6 would be dragged down by K4. Mercifully, the application of engines running full astern caused the vessels to separate just a few seconds before K4 rolled over and sank. Submarine K7 arrived at that moment and stopped nearby with her deck crew already stripped down and ready to engage in rescue efforts. There were no survivors from K4.

While all this was happening, the destroyers and escorts of the second flotilla were still rushing past and maintaining speeds of twenty-one knots. Two of these vessels narrowly missed K3 but their wash spread outwards and swept across the casing of K7 where would-be rescuers were suddenly washed into the sea. Worse still, some ships were passing over the spot where K17 had sunk where crewmen were struggling in the water. Many were pushed under and drowned while others were chopped up by propellers. Only nine men from K17 were picked up and one of these, picked up by K7, died later.

Exercise EC1 concluded with the loss of two K-Boats and left three more in a crippled condition. One light cruiser had been damaged. Over 100 lives were lost. Despite this, the wartime navy strove to conceal the entire matter from public scrutiny and the truth emerged long after the war was over.

The death toll aboard K class submarines had now risen to 270 men without a single shot ever being fired at the enemy. As a result, most K class vessels were decommissioned and consigned to scrap yards. K18, K19, K20 and K21 were withdrawn to Portsmouth where they received extensive modifications and were re-designated as 'M' class submarines. Despite this, they found little favour with their crews who dubbed them 'Mutton Boats'.

The accident was kept secret during the war, and a memorial cairn was finally erected 84 years later, on 31 January 2002 at Anstruther harbour opposite the Isle of May.

TO COMMEMORATE THOSE MEMBERS
OF THE SHIPS' COMPANIES OF
HIS MAJESTY'S SUBMARINES K4 AND K17
WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES
IN THE SERVICE OF THEIR COUNTRY
OFF THE ISLE OF MAY
ON 31ST JANUARY 1918

ERECTED IN THEIR MEMORY DURING THE SUBMARINE CENTENARY YEAR 2001