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WWII mystery solved – HMS Urge discovered off Malta

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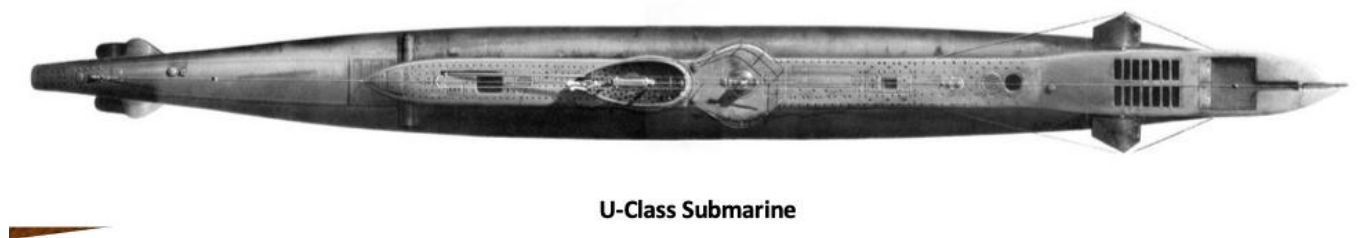
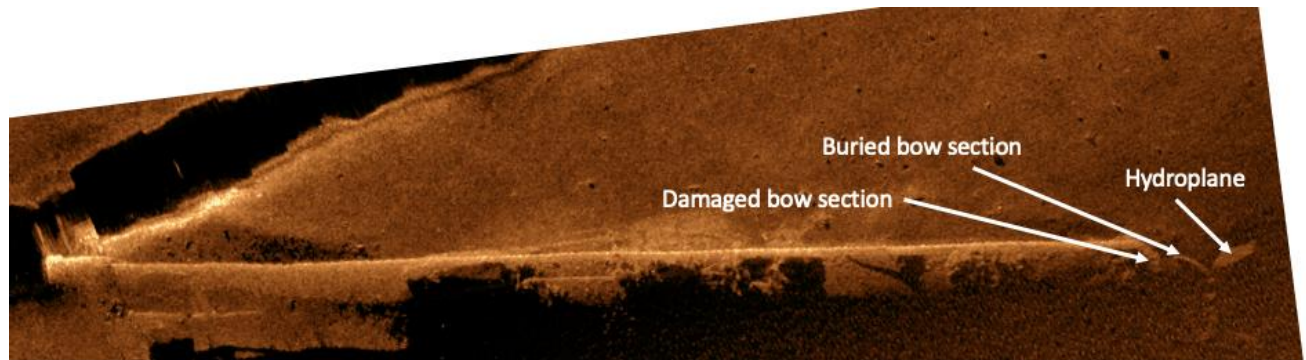
A marine archaeology survey team from the University of Malta, working in co-operation with the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, has located the wreck of the British WW2 submarine HMS Urge off the coast of Malta. Results from this search have established beyond doubt that on 27th April 1942 HMS Urge struck a German mine when leaving the British submarine base at the height of the siege of Malta by German and Italian forces in WW2. The wreck of the submarine stands upright and proud at a depth of 108m on the seabed, her deck gun facing forward.

Professor Timmy Gambin, from the University's Department of Classics & Archaeology, led the survey team, whose discovery finally resolves the question of how one of Britain's most successful WW2 submarines was lost. The search team consisted of maritime archaeology staff and students from the University of Malta and a number of sub-contracted vessels.

The submarine had a crew of 32 but was also carrying 11 other naval personnel and a journalist to her destination of Alexandria. German and Italian bombing of Malta had damaged the Maltese base of the Royal Navy's 10th Submarine Flotilla too severely for operations to continue, despite its many successes against enemy vessels supplying

Rommel's Afrika Corps. This departure should have allowed her crew some respite after the most intense warfare experienced by British submarines in WW2, but fate dictated that her path met a mine laid by German E boats on her course in the channel out of Malta. She sank quickly with no survivors.

In the spring of 1942 the Maltese Islands were so heavily bombed that the 10th Submarine Flotilla known as the Fighting 10th were ordered to leave Malta and set up base in Alexandria. They left periodically leaving a number of hours in between departures – HMS Urge departed sometime in April but never arrived in Alexandria.



U-Class Submarine

Speaking to TVM, Prof. Gambin said that “the damage to the bow shows a very violent explosion where the entire bow section is detached from the rest of the submarine, indicating that the ship would have sunk very fast giving no chance to anybody to survive from this tragedy.”

The distinctive features of HMS Urge have been identified by comparing strikingly clear images of the wreck with wartime photographs.

Spellbinding images of the submarine show her standing defiant after more than 77 years underwater, accommodating a multitude of marine life whilst maintaining the vigilant stance for which she was so widely acclaimed. The bows of the submarine lie buried in the seabed following the impact of her descent from the surface.

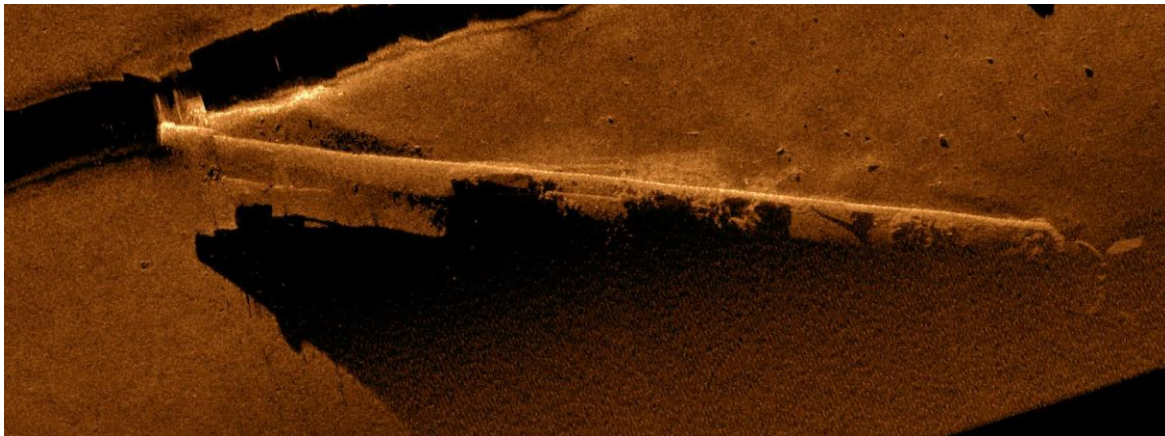
“Besides the damage on the bow, the wreck is in absolutely fantastic condition, it is sitting upright on the sea-bed, very proud, in the direction that it was ordered to take on its way to

Alexandria. It is actually quite a poignant vision to see this submarine still upright and proud”, said Prof. Gambin.

HMS Urge’s captain was Lieutenant-Commander EP Tomkinson, DSO, RN, and in WW2 the submarine earned renown for successfully attacking an enemy battleship, cruiser, and merchant ships. HMS Urge also landed British commandos in special operations, as well as participating in secret missions involving British Secret Intelligence Service agents on enemy coasts. Her disappearance in 1942 had long been a mystery.

The search team was working for a research project led by Professor Gambin, Francis Dickinson and Platon Alexiades. Francis Dickinson is a grandson of Lieutenant-Commander Tomkinson, who provided information on HMS Urge and lead financial sponsorship of the project, and Platon Alexiades, an experienced naval researcher from Montreal, Canada with critical insight into relevant military records of WW2, who also sponsored the project. The sponsorship agreement was facilitated through the University of Malta’s Research and Innovation Trust (RIDT).

Having reviewed materials relating to the discovery, the UK Ministry of Defence has approved the research project’s conclusion that the wreck discovered is that of HMS Urge.



Professor Timmy Gambin told TVM that “some time ago there was a claim that HMS Urge was discovered off Libya. This claim was based on a single sonar image but never verified through footage and photography. With the data that we gathered, we were able to put together a very comprehensive package comparing what we observed in our sonar data, in our video footage, from our photographs and compared these to actual historic photographs of the Urge and we were in little doubt with regard to the actual ID of the submarine but to be absolutely certain we sent this package to the Ministry of Defence who confirmed that they are very satisfied with the research that we have done, and with our claim.”

The wreck site is a war grave and will be protected under Maltese and international legislation. “In collaboration with Heritage Malta and the Superintendence [of Cultural Heritage] we will now start the motion to protect this site. We will declare the area an area of archaeological importance, meaning that certain activities such as bottom fishing and

anchoring will not be allowed in its proximity so that we will actually protect the physical aspect of the site. The site is also a war grave so any access to the site, such as diving or exploration from the outside will have to be done in a very careful and meticulous way.”

The crew of HMS Urge had formed bonds with the people of Malta, and the submarine is now a war grave as well as part of Malta’s cultural heritage. A memorial and public information on HMS Urge are now planned for April 2020 on the 78th anniversary of the loss of HMS Urge. Lieutenant-Commander Tomkinson’s daughter, Mrs. Bridget Dickinson, hopes that families of those lost will be able to join a commemoration in Malta.