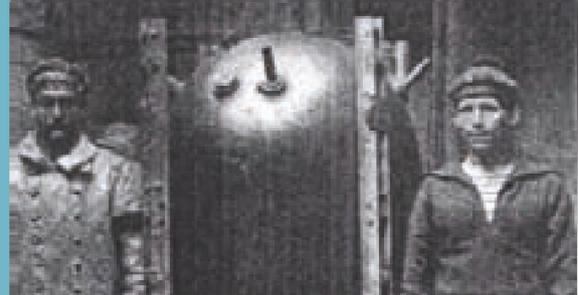


ASK YOUR SEA-RELATED QUESTION



A mine salvaged from SM UC-61 (Chatelle & Tison, 1927)

Over 1500 Flemish researchers and managers are involved in professional activities relating to the sea and coast. Do you have a pressing question about the ocean, the dunes, the beach or the estuaries? Ask it and they will provide you with an answer!

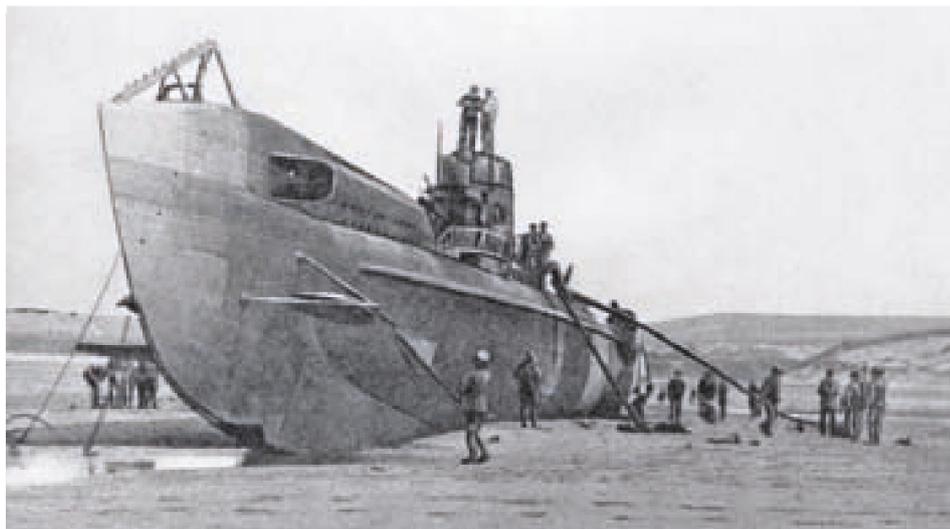
WHAT DO THE BELGIAN CAVALRY, A GERMAN U-BOAT AND THE VAN DEUREN MORTAR HAVE IN COMMON?

Sometimes events can take an unexpected turn. Take the following example: the story of the Belgian cavalry, a German U-boat and the inventor of the Van Deuren mortar.

THE TRAGIC FATE OF A GERMAN SUBMARINE IN WISSANT

The captains of the small German U-boats were all too aware of the unpredictability of the sea between the northern French and British coasts with its powerful tides. They operated from Zeebrugge and Ostend with submarines specially designed for this region. Captain Georg Gerth, commander of SM UC-61, experienced this personally when he carried out his fifth combat mission on 25 July 1917. SM UC-61 was a mine-laying submarine with a length of about 50 metres, had a crew of 25 men and had been commissioned on 13 December 1916. She had a deck gun and three torpedo tubes and carried 18 naval mines.

The mission's objective was to break through the French-British Dover Barrage and then lay mines on the shipping routes to the ports of Boulogne and Le Havre. Captain Gerth tried to navigate close to the coast between Cap Blanc Nez and Cap Gris Nez. However, he had overestimated the depth of the water along the route. Suddenly, the crew heard the keel grating on the sand. The U-boat was stranded on a sandbank and irretrievably lost.



German U-boat UC-61 captured by Belgian cavalymen at Wissant (Chatelle & Tison 1927)

THE BELGIAN CAVALRY PLAYS A LEADING PART

Captain Gerth knew that it would not take long for the conning tower to come to the surface due to the falling tide. His only option was to abandon ship, destroy her and surrender to the enemy. But a few French customs officers stationed at Wissant heard strange noises in the pitch-darkness of night. They alerted the nearest military force, namely the 5th regiment of lancers, a Belgian cavalry unit. Several dozens of cavalymen rushed to the scene and saw the German crew making frantic efforts to destroy SM UC-61 in the bay of Wissant. They managed to break the U-boat in half with a heavy explosion. Fire broke out but it was fairly quickly put out with seawater. The Belgian cavalymen stood by and looked on in amazement. The German crew was ordered to walk to Calais escorted by the mounted lancers. The wreck stayed behind with several unexploded naval mines on board.

VAN DEUREN AND HIS MORTAR

In Calais, Belgian engineer Pierre Van Deuren heard the story about the German U-boat crew taken prisoner. He was testing the recently designed trench mortar named after him, and investigating the possibility of deploying this weapon – mounted on the forward deck or afterdeck of a ship – against submarines. Now that Paris had given permission to install this Belgian weapon on

French transport ships, operators needed accurate directions and firing tables. The Belgian Ministry of War allowed Van Deuren's workshop to complete the order as soon as possible. In the meantime, the weapon had been considerably improved thanks to tests at sea carried out from the base in Calais. But it remained uncertain how an enemy submarine would behave when mortar rounds came down and exploded. This could now be tested in September 1917 thanks to the German U-boat that was stranded near Wissant. As SM UC-61 was 4-5 metres under water at high tide, it was possible to examine the effects of explosions on a submerged U-boat. First fire was opened on the target from the beach. The projectiles landed perfectly in the immediate vicinity.

The fifteenth mortar round even fell so close to the target that the shock of the explosion set off a dozen naval mines in the bow in a chain reaction. The entire bow was destroyed. The French evaluation commission was impressed.

Luc Vandeweyer