

## H.M. Submarine L55

In Haslar Royal Naval Cemetery there is a screen wall memorial erected over a communal grave of the crew of H.M. Submarine L55 who lost their lives in the Baltic on the 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1919. Sixty 'L' Class submarines were ordered by the Royal Navy between 1916 and 1918, under the War Emergency Building Scheme. However, after the ending of the First World War the government cancelled several of the building contracts.



The 'L' Class incorporated improvements and innovations which included better living conditions, armament upgrades and a longer endurance. Water-tight bulkheads were fitted dividing the pressure hull into six compartments. This enabled any ingress of water to be controlled in separate compartments rather than spreading throughout the submarine. If the submarine became stranded on the sea-bed the bulkheads were strong enough to withstand the pressure. Flooding could also be controlled within a compartment if the submarine was unable to rise from the sea-bed and allowed crewmen to escape. There were however problems with the design. Stability was indifferent when surfacing and an inadequate flow of water to the propellers caused cavitation at speeds above 12-knots. L55's technical details were as follows:

Builder ~ Fairfield Shipbuilding & Engineering Company, Govan;

Laid Down ~ May 1917; Launched 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1918; Completed & Commissioned 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1918;

Dimensions ~ Length Overall 235-ft; Length Between Perpendiculars 230-ft 6-inches;

Breadth 23-ft 6-inches; Draft 13-ft;

Displacement ~ 975-tons (Surfaced); 1,168-tons (Submerged);

Machinery ~ 2 x Vickers Diesel Engines 2400hp; 2 x Electric Motors 1600hp; 2 x Propellers;

Speed ~ 17.5-Knots (Surfaced); 10.5-Knots (Submerged);

Range/Endurance ~ 4,500 Nautical Miles at 8-Knots;

Armament ~ 6 x 21-inch Torpedoes (Bow) – 12 Carried; 2 x 4-inch Q.F. Guns; 1 x M/Gun;

Complement ~ 40 Officers & Ratings; 44 Officers & Ratings (War Complement);

For thousands of people across Europe the Armistice of November 1918 gave them the opportunity to return to peaceful patterns of life after four years of war. A growing concern for Allied governments was whether the ‘Red Tide of Bolshevism’ would engulf war torn Europe. After the abdication of the Czar, Imperial Russia collapsed and the revolution that followed in November 1917 inspired the Bolshevik leadership in the belief that they would eventually govern the country.

The Allies took the decision to intervene as the Russian situation deteriorated and civil war erupted between the Bolsheviks and the White Russian forces. Part of Britain’s response was to send a Royal Naval Squadron to the Baltic to protect British trade interests and keep the sea lanes open to and from the Baltic. ‘Operation Red Trek’ was the codename used by the Royal Navy for their Baltic campaign. Fighting raged across the Baltic region between the

Bolshevik Red Army, pro-independent forces and pro-German forces. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1917 the German Army occupied the Latvian capital of Riga and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk gave the Baltic countries to Germany. The Allied intervention in the Baltic did help to establish the independence of Latvia and Estonia but failed in the attempt to occupy Petrograd/St Petersburg – with the White Russian Army.



The Royal Naval Squadron of cruisers, destroyers and submarines sent to the Baltic were commanded by Rear-Admiral E. Alexander-Sinclair. Arriving in December 1918 his forces entered Tallinn, the Estonian capital and Latvian ports where troops and supplies were landed. Identified Bolshevik positions were targeted and bombarded by the Royal Navy to help the White Russian and Allied forces. In January 1919 Rear-Admiral Alexander-Sinclair was succeeded by Rear-Admiral Walter Cowan.

Although reduced by First World War operations the once powerful Russian Baltic Fleet was still a significant force accessible to the Bolsheviks for their defence of Petrograd. The Royal Navy did not have enough warships to effectively blockade the Baltic ports and fulfil other operational commitments. Opportunistic raids were undertaken by the Bolsheviks against the blockading warships and other units. H.M.S. Cassandra was sunk by a mine with the loss of 11 lives on the 4<sup>th</sup> December, 1918. On Boxing Day 1918 the Bolshevik destroyers Avtroil and Spartak who had been shelling Tallinn were captured by the Royal Navy.

Rear-Admiral Cowan took the decision that Tallinn was not an ideal base for operations against the Bolsheviks and he moved on the 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1919 to an anchorage in Björkö Sound. From there he was able to launch raids on Kronstadt. During the summer months of 1919 the warships of the Bolshevik fleet were trapped in the port of Kronstadt although intermittent engagements still took place, in which each side sustained casualties and damage to their ships.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1919 H.M. Submarine L55 whilst on patrol in Caporsky Bay in the Gulf of Finland attacked with torpedoes, the 1,260-ton Bolshevik destroyers, the Gavril and Azard. The torpedoes missed their targets and the L55 itself then came under attack from the destroyers. In taking avoiding action the L55 entered a British laid minefield and was sunk with the loss of all her crew by the detonation of a mine. It was later claimed by Soviet sources that the Azard had sunk the L55 by gunfire. The report was not substantiated and if proved to be correct the L55 would be the only British submarine sunk by a Soviet ship.

Eight years later a Soviet minesweeper found the wreck of the L55 after a trawler had reported an unidentified underwater object in 1926. On the 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1928 the L55 was raised by Soviet salvage vessels. The remains of 34 of the 42 crew were recovered from the submarine and the British authorities requested the repatriation of the bodies to the UK. Permission was granted but the Soviets would not allow any British warships into their territorial waters and the 34 coffins were placed aboard the British merchant ship Truro and then transferred to H.M.S. Champion. On the 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1928 the coffins were interred with full military honours in a communal grave in Haslar Royal Naval Cemetery, Gosport.

The career of the L55 did not end with her sinking. After being salvaged she was taken to Leningrad – formerly Petrograd/St Petersburg – and re-constructed at the Baltic Works at a cost one million roubles. Commissioned on the 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1931 as the JI55, she was again sunk later that same month whilst on sea trials with the loss of her soviet crew. Salvaged and refitted the JI55 was later named Bezbozhnik – ‘Atheist’ and became a prototype for Soviet L

Class submarines. The Bezboznik was used for training Soviet submarine crews until the outbreak of the Second World War. Repaired after sustaining accidental in 1941 it is believed that she was scrapped in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2005 the Duke of York unveiled a memorial in Portsmouth Cathedral to the 15 Royal Naval Officers, 92 Ratings, 4 Royal Air Force Officers and 1 Airman killed in action in the Baltic Waters during 1918-19. Their names, including those of L55 are inscribed on the memorial. A similar memorial was placed in the Church of the Holy Ghost in Tallin and St Saviour's Church, Riga in 2003. The names of all submarines lost in war or in times of peace are recorded on a memorial erected alongside H.M. Submarine Alliance at the Submarine Museum, Gosport.

### Sources

Wikipedia Web-Site ~ [www.wikipedia.co.uk](http://www.wikipedia.co.uk)

War Memorial Web-Site ~ [www.memorialsinportsmouth.co.uk](http://www.memorialsinportsmouth.co.uk)

Encyclopaedia Of British Submarines 1901-1955 by Paul Akemann. Published in 1989.  
ISBN 0 907771 42 4

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