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A model of the submarine *Dykkeren* in the Historical Model Collection at the Danish Naval Museum. Image: Danish Naval Museum. Below: Lieutenant Christiansen, captain of the submarine. Image: The Danish Defence Library.



DESPERATE RACE TO SAVE TRAPPED SUBMARINERS

Back on the surface the crew of the submarine support vessel *Sleipner* had moved fast following the collision. Not far from the place where it had happened was one of the minefields that guaranteed Danish neutrality during WW1. The minefield was guarded by the gunboat *Guldborgsund*, which had a direct telephone line to shore and from there to the Naval Headquarters in Copenhagen. Via this the captain of the *Guldborgsund* was able, just 15 minutes after *Vesla* had struck *Dykkeren*, to sound the alarm. From the HQ a massive rescue operation was immediately set in motion. On board the *Guldborgsund* happened to be Captain Baron Niels Juel-Brockdorff, who was to play a central role in the rescue operation. Juel-Brockdorff was visiting the captain of the *Guldborgsund* (the baron's brother-in-law). Since Juel-Brockdorff was both himself a submarine captain and diver, he immediately went aboard the *Sleipner* and headed back to the site of the collision. When they arrived they could see that bubbles were still coming up from the stricken submarine. Suddenly, three men that had just escaped from the sunken submarine joined the bubbles. It was by then 14:40 and the men were soon brought on board *Sleipner*, where they revealed there were still six submariners alive in *Dykkeren*. They said that the vessel's captain, Lieutenant Christiansen, was in the process of trying to get the rest of them out through the submarine's tower. While waiting for more peo-

SOREN NORBY OF THE ROYAL DANISH DEFENCE COLLEGE CONCLUDES HIS TWO-PART TELLING OF AN INCIDENT IN WHICH A DANISH SUBMARINE WAS RAMMED BY A FREIGHTER AND SENT TO THE BOTTOM. HER CREW WERE ALIVE, BUT ENTOMBED.



ple to emerge from below, Juel-Brockdorff decided to dive down to the submarine. Dressed in a heavy diving suit of the time, he was soon lowered into the water but due to the strong current his first two

attempts to reach *Dykkeren* failed. Only minutes after the message from *Guldborgsund* had reached the Naval HQ in Copenhagen, the order was given that the Navy's No1 Squadron, which was lying at

anchor in the Sound, was to move to the scene at highest possible speed. At the same time a message was sent to the salvage company *Svitzer*, with whom the Royal Danish Navy (RDN) in 1911 had entered into a contract about the salvage of wrecked ships and submarines.

Svitzer received the message at 14:30 and just 30 minutes later the salvage ship *Kattegat* left Copenhagen. It was soon followed by *Svitzer's* support craft *Odin* and *Thor*, which, however, had to be manned by navy personnel before they were ready to leave at such short notice.

At the same time the Press heard about the event and soon a swarm of journalists descended on the Naval HQ. *Kattegat* reached *Tarbæk* around 15:30 and immediately began preparing for salvaging *Dykkeren*. At this time nobody knew whether the crew on board the submarine were still alive and Juel-Brockdorff therefore made a third attempt at reaching the submarine.

This time he succeeded and suddenly the men trapped in the torpedo room heard knocking sounds from outside.

By tapping Morse code on the hull the trapped men and Juel-Brockdorff were able to signal to each other. For the first time in the five-and-a-half hours that had passed since the collision, those on the surface got an idea of the situation on board *Dykkeren*. It was becoming desperate. The water rose steadily and the men left in the submarine were beginning to seriously doubt whether they would survive. One of the sailors,

who was on his first cruise with the submarine, sat crying, talking about how hard it would be for his mother, when he, her only child, drowned. The engine-room operator, C.N. Andersen, tried to keep morale up while he - as he later told it - was thinking how annoyed he was that he had just bought a new uniform. It had cost 160 krone, which was a considerable sum in those days. The five men trapped in the torpedo room now had to resort to the last option - the scarce oxygen contained within the Drager-vests to sustain them. They could, however, hear divers walking around on the submarine's hull and the sound of ongoing attempts to rescue them kept spirits high. Immediately upon their arrival the divers from Svitzer had focused on pumping new oxygen into the submarine. Dykkeren was equipped with small valves, where an external oxygen tube could be attached and at 19.15 such a hose had been attached. They began pumping oxygen in to keep alive the trapped crew. The air was cold but breathable and only a short time later the bow of the submarine began to rise towards the surface. This was not to be the end of their problems. On the contrary, for, as one of the five subsequently wrote to a friend: 'This meant that the water in the room suddenly moved astern and increased pressure on the door between the torpedo room and control room. This made the door leak even more than before and the water in the torpedo room quickly rose. It soon reached up to the middle of the torpedo tubes and it looked to us as though we - after escaping the terrible chlorine gas - were now to suffer a miserable death by drowning.' It was about 21.45 when Dykkeren's bow broke the surface



again. The submarine's stern was still resting on the bottom and a new problem soon arose. The crane on the Kattegat could not raise the submarine high enough for the front hatch to clear the water. The hatch, through which the trapped men were intending to escape, was now about 30 centimetres below the surface. If it was opened, the torpedo room would be filled with water faster than the trapped men could escape. Once again the crew of Kattegat had to think and move fast. While the ship's fresh water tank was emptied



and the fore-peak and cable compartment were filled with water, the crew was working in haste to move iron ballast from the aft to the bow. This managed to tilt the ship sufficiently, so that the torpedo hatch just barely cleared the surface, but not higher than the waves, which still washed over it. Sandbags were placed around the hatch to keep the water away and a large quantity of oil was poured onto the water. It helped. At 23:30 the hatch was finally opened and the five crewmembers, who had spent nine-and-a-half hours trapped

in the submarine, could finally one-by-one climb out into the fresh air. Juel-Brockdorff later wrote: 'This moment will never be forgotten. We all had a lump in our throats when the moment finally came, and the crew emerged.' The rescued submariners were all very exhausted and shocked, but were all, after an examination by the doctor aboard Kattegat, declared out of danger. At the same time Dykkeren's tower was checked out and, as feared, the body of Lieutenant Christiansen was found in there. The sinking of Dykkeren had claimed the Danish submarine force's first fatality. The rescue operation, and not least the successful free escape of the three crewmembers attracted attention around the world. Dykkeren was subsequently salvaged and towed to Copenhagen, but was deemed not worth repairing. In early 1918 she was broken up and scrapped. Juel-Brockdorff subsequently received the Knight's Cross for his participation in rescue efforts while crew of the Dykkeren, as a reward for their conduct, received an extra three months' salary. After Lieutenant Christiansen climbed into the tower and was never seen alive again, C.N. Andersen had taken command of the five trapped men. He was awarded the Medal for Noble Deeds. Andersen was, however, to suffer the rest of his life from the damage the chlorine gas had done to his vocal cords and throat.

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The gunboat *Guldborgsund*, which played a vital role in the successful rescue operation through its direct connection to Naval Headquarters in Copenhagen. Image: The Danish Defence Library.

Top: Dykkeren's stern after the collision. The aft hatch casing with the missing hatch is seen on the right. Image: The Danish Defence Library. Above: Captain Baron Niels Juel-Brockdorff. Image: The Danish Defence Library.

