

## DAZZLE PAINTING -- The art of combat.

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In 1917, U-boats were sinking 60 British ships a week. Then a young naval lieutenant had an idea: dazzle the enemy with psychedelic paint. David Burston reports there are many well-known stories about the first world war - the losses at Passchendaele, the deaths at Gallipoli and the gallantry of our Tommy Atkinses - but little has ever emerged about one brief, but literally surreal, episode in the history of the British navy. It was the spring of 1917, and the Germans had stepped up their U-boat campaign. There were hundreds operating in the Atlantic and North Sea, targeting both the fleet and food convoys with the intention of starving Britain into defeat. At one point, as many as 60 ships a week were being lost to U-boats. Against them the British navy seemed powerless, and in April the prime minister, Lloyd George, warned the admiralty: 'Act or go.'

It was a measure of the navy's desperation that it turned to a young lieutenant who was also a marine artist. A few weeks earlier, 38-year-old Norman Wilkinson had submitted a crazy-sounding plan that would eventually help win the day and save countless lives. He aimed to transform the entire fleet from battleship grey to a riot of colour and cubist art. These so-called dazzle ships would be painted in wild and weird colours to dupe German submarines - the first time art had been used in a theatre of war. Today, it would be like Damien Hirst painting his trademark psychedelic spots all over the army's tanks. Most people thought Wilkinson mad, but he thought his plan stood a chance.

As the commander of a patrol boat in the English Channel, he knew that a U-boat commander needed to know the co-ordinates of the bow, stern and funnel of his target ship in order to calculate the path of his torpedo. Wilkinson reasoned that if carefully designed images and shapes could disrupt the outline of a ship, then the torpedo might miss its target; the U-boat commander would be dazzled into confusion. So impressed was Sir Joseph Maclay, the minister of shipping, that he ordered the immediate conversion of 50 merchant ships on the North Atlantic run, and Wilkinson's team of 'dazzle officers' went to work. He quickly gathered London's most bohemian artists, illustrators and cartoonists, including the prominent painter Edward Wadsworth. Wadsworth had been a naval intelligence officer and was a leading member of the fashionable art movement known as vorticism.

The vorticists were influenced by the French and Italian salons that grew out of the cubist movement led by Picasso. Headed by the artist and writer Wyndham Lewis, they produced a magazine, *Blast*, that lambasted the war, governments and institutions they saw as responsible for the senseless deaths of a generation. As he later recounted in his autobiography, Wadsworth had no qualms about abandoning his political ideology. He could not resist the challenge of having his work produced 'on a scale that I couldn't have dreamed of'. The scene was now set for this astonishing marriage of Establishment and bohemia.

As well as recruiting painters, Wilkinson hired model makers and art students. Working from the Royal Academy in Piccadilly, the artists painted their designs on small models mounted on turntables, which were then viewed through a dummy periscope. As the periscope viewer turned the handle, the table revolved, so artists could judge the effectiveness of the design: the harder to guess the direction of the model ship, the better the dazzle effect. The most

successful designs were then painted by art students onto blueprints and immediately dispatched to ports for execution. It must have been bewildering for locals to see warships such as HMS Vindictive enter dry dock in grey and steam out in blazing stripes and swirls.

Interest in the project spread, and several curious admirals came to inspect and try the periscope test. The King, George V, a former naval officer, couldn't resist trying his hand, and visited in October 1917. Surrounded by hushed onlookers, Wilkinson set the model warship at a course of east-southeast (four o'clock) while the royal guinea pig peered into the periscope. As the King deliberated, Wilkinson respectfully reminded him that a submarine commander would not have the luxury of time, so he opted for southwest (7.40) and missed. Wilkinson had a new convert to his cause.

Bolstered by this royal seal of approval, the dazzle project expanded to all the main ports, including Liverpool, Chatham and Tyneside. That year the yorticists undertook their largest commission - to paint the Olympic, the sister ship of the Titanic.

The United States having entered the war in April 1917, the Olympic was working as a troop carrier bringing 6,000 US forces on each Atlantic crossing. Together, Wilkinson and Wadsworth made it a dazzle masterpiece, and the Olympic was relaunched in yellow, blue and red in April 1918.

After only one month in her new role, she won a place in the record books. At dawn on May 12, 1918, she was returning to Southampton when she startled a German submarine waiting on the surface. The Olympic's captain had no hesitation in firing her guns as the baffled submarine tried to submerge. Then she rammed the U-boat, claiming the distinction of being the only merchant vessel in history ever to destroy an enemy warship.

Now the Americans wanted to know more. So Wilkinson crossed the Atlantic (on the dazzled ship Leviathan) to meet Franklin Roosevelt, then secretary to the American navy. Wilkinson's presentation convinced any doubters, and he left with Roosevelt promising him 'every assistance'. If anything, the American school produced even wilder designs, creating a sight that one sailor described as 'a sea full of Easter eggs'. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how effective the ships were in battle. By all reports, the Germans were bewildered. A British captain said later that one ship, SS Ascanius, appeared to be heading in the opposite direction. In the event, the armistice of November 1918 put an end to their gaudy life.

While the navy kept no record of what befell its total of 2,000 dazzle ships, most of them survived; they returned after the war to their sombre grey. The Americans, however, recorded that less than 1% of its dazzled fleet were torpedoed. In all, the allies dazzled 3,623 ships. The experiment was not repeated on such a scale in the second world war.

The King rewarded Wilkinson with the OBE, and the Commission for Inventions gave him £2,000, enough in those days to buy a grand house. Wadsworth created many woodcuts and paintings based on his time with the dazzle project. His work hangs today in London's Tate Britain gallery. You can go and see Abstract composition (1915) and A Seaport (1923) and wonder what the Germans thought when they looked into the periscope.