

## THE H.47 DISASTER, 9th July 1929

Tuesday 9th July 1929. With dawn breaking, two submarines, L.12 and L.14, leave the Irish Sea off the Coast of Pembrokeshire, and proceed south through Saint George's Channel close to Milford Haven. They have just finished an exercise known as "Rear Admiral Submarine's War", and are returning to base. A third submarine, H.47, has gone on ahead as she is based further along the south coast and anyway cannot keep up with the cruising speed of the L-class submarines. All 3 submarines are cruising on the surface.

At around 7.30am, H.47 is sighted some 12 miles ahead on the starboard side. L.12, followed by L.14, slowly start to close on H.47. It is noted that L.12 and H.47 are on slightly converging courses, but with no cause for alarm at this stage. By 7.50am the distance is no more than 2 miles and the two submarines are still on the same course. At this crucial stage the Commanding Officer of L.12, Captain Oram, hands over the watch to Sub-Lieutenant Wise, a young officer undergoing a course of instruction. He is alone on the bridge, with the exception of two other sub-lieutenants. It is only at 8.00am that he is joined by Lieutenant Keen, his superior officer.

At this moment the second submarine, L.14, develops engine trouble and reduces speed to about 8 knots. L.12 does likewise in order to maintain the same distance between the two boats. However, the distance between H.47 and L.12 has already become alarming. At 8.05am Lieutenant Keen realizes that a collision is imminent. He decides to alter course dramatically, putting the wheel over to starboard in order to try and pass under stern of H.47. But it is too late. In a last desperate attempt to avoid a collision L.12 stops its engines and then puts them to full speed astern.

Meanwhile on H.47 the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Gardner, also realizes that a collision is imminent. He decides to turn to starboard and go full speed astern.

However, nothing now can avoid a serious impact. At 8.08am the bow of L.12 smashes into the side of H.47 at the level of the conning tower. The two submarines lock together and begin to sink.

Down below deck on L.12 Lieutenant Lipscomb, the Second-in-Command, is shaving. A short distance away in the wardroom Captain Oram and Lieutenant Keen are finishing breakfast. Keen drinks his orange juice, puts the empty glass down on the table and for no apparent reason flicks the rim, making it ring out. « Stop that at once, » shouts Lieutenant Lipscomb. « If it rings out a sailor will drown « . Keen makes no attempt to stop it. Before Lipscomb can get to it the glass rings out. Keen leaves for the bridge and the Captain then leaves for the control room. Shortly after, there is a violent jolt. Lieutenant Lipscomb is almost thrown to the deck by the impact.

Things then happen very quickly. The Lieutenant makes for the control room, but the passage from the wardroom is blocked by two or three ratings who are also trying to gain access. Pushing his way through, to his horror, he sees water cascading down the conning tower. The coxswain is apparently trying to get the lower conning tower hatch shut, and together they manage to slam it down. But an electric lead going up the conning tower to the gyro compass repeater is jammed in the hatch and water continues to spurt through this small cavity at high pressure, drenching everything.

Within seconds there is a violent electrical explosion right across the control room. A vast sheet of flame spreads across the room causing all the main fuses to blow. Fires are now burning from one end of the control room to the other. Everyone is drenched in water and some are badly burned.

The submarine begins to take a steep angle towards the bow and the tons of water that had cascaded down into the control room surge forward carrying men off their feet. It is now urgent for the vessel to maintain buoyancy. Lieutenant Lipscomb reflects for a moment and then shouts an

order to an engineer to help him put full pressure on the two main ballast tanks in case there is water there. They then proceed to open the valve of the midship auxiliary tank, putting 100lb pressure on it. The engineer, who by now is half under water, hesitates for a second but the Lieutenant yells at him to carry out the order. Seconds later they are both flung against the electrical controls on the forward bulkhead.

As if this wasn't enough, both men are then knocked sideways by the Chief Petty Officer who is swept on top of them by the rush of water coming out of the beam tube space, as the bow of the submarine starts to sink. The Lieutenant finds himself holding a brass lock controlling the drop keel, a 10-ton weight which can be released in case of emergency in order to gain buoyancy. It is now practically dark everywhere, water is coming up to his waist, and the air is filling with chlorine from one of the batteries flooded with salt water. He reaches for the key, but sees that the Petty Officer miraculously has a knife in his hand. He orders him to cut the leather strap holding the master lever. He does this and together with a mighty heave they manage to pull out the locking pin. The keel is released and the submarine gives a distinctive jolt upwards.

At this moment the light from a large fire over the steering wheel reveals the depth gauge indicator hard against STOP at 100 feet. The needle has buckled. The engine room telegraphs are also at STOP. Lieutenant Lipscomb gives the order HALF ASTERN BOTH and someone manages to work the order telegraphs. Instantly the after end of the submarine shakes violently, so much so that the Lieutenant orders STOP. By this time the bow of the submarine is at an angle of about 60 degrees facing down. Suddenly the big fire over the steering wheel is extinguished and they are in total darkness. They find themselves standing in two or three feet of water and breathing gas.

To their surprise, the submarine now appears to be horizontal. Someone manages to grab some emergency lighting. The vessel seems to be rocking slightly and they can hear water lapping gently around the hull. The Lieutenant instinctively goes to the periscope. He raises the eyepiece and peers through. To his astonishment he sees daylight and the open sea. The diving gauge needle is showing five feet. He calls out WE ARE ON THE SURFACE! The Petty Officer clutches his hand with both hands, practically wrenching it off. « Well done Sir ! », he says about half a dozen times. He is joined by two other sailors who proceed to slap him on the back.

Meanwhile on the surface Commander Friedberger in submarine L.14 has been watching the whole saga unfold. He stares in horror as L.12 collides with H.47 and locks into her frame. As the submarines begin to sink he steers for the point of the collision. Soon he sees heads bobbing about in the water. His crew throw the cork life-buoys and inflated swimming belts into the sea. They manage to rescue the Commanding Officer of L.12, a Lieutenant, three Sub-Lieutenants and four ratings. Two of L.14's ratings dive over the side and one of them secures Lieutenant Keen. Another manages to rescue an Able-Seaman, but the poor man does not survive. The Captain watches helplessly as one rating some distance off the starboard bow sinks below the water. He goes to the stern of the submarine where he sees another small group of heads bobbing in the water. These men are survivors from H.47. He secures the Commanding Officer and one Petty Officer. A third man sinks despite efforts from an Able Seaman who dives in to try to save him. Commander Friedberger succeeds in making contact with L.12 who reports that their lights are out, they are suffering from escaping chlorine gas, and they have water in the beam time well.

Indeed, below deck on L.12 their troubles are still not over. Water continues to pour through the gap between the lower conning tower hatch and its seating. The conning tower is still full of water. Lieutenant Lipscomb opens the conning tower drain valve and finally the hatch can be opened. To their horror they find a dead body blocking the hatch. It is the Petty Officer telegraphist who had left his post and attempted to escape. He had been prevented from doing so by the water crashing down on top of him. They remove his body and everyone proceeds in an orderly fashion to the upper deck. The ordeal is over. The Lieutenant is the last to go up. He looks around him. L.14 is now in the distance on the port quarter. No sign of H.47. He notices a man standing near him whom he does not recognize. He is bleeding from the nose and ear. He tells the Lieutenant that he is the Stoker Petty Officer of H.47. He had just happened to go up on to the bridge for a breath of fresh air when the collision took place. As he could not swim he somehow managed to

cling onto the stern of L.12 which remained sticking out of the water.

Only now does the awful truth register. H.47 has gone to the bottom.

## **COURT MARTIAL**

Inevitably, following this tragedy a Court Martial was held.

There were numerous inconsistencies in the evidence given, which is perhaps not surprising during the general state of confusion. In particular, a message was reputedly passed to Lieutenant Commander Oram shortly before the incident requesting permission to reduce speed. He claimed he never received such a message. One clear fact remains, namely that Lieutenant Commander Oram should almost certainly have remained on the bridge instead of handing over to junior officers, given the possibility of a collision. One can only speculate what might have been the outcome had he taken this course of action. Although he was found guilty of negligently performing the duty of Commanding Officer of H.M. Submarine L.12, he was nevertheless acquitted. A decision that was regarded as controversial.

Lieutenant Keen, who was at the commands of L.12 at the time, was found guilty of negligently or by default causing the loss of H.M. Submarine H.47. He was dismissed his ship and severely reprimanded.

Lieutenant Gardner was found guilty of negligently performing the duty of Commanding Officer and Officer of the Watch of H.M. Submarine H.47. He was reprimanded.

There were only 3 survivors from H 47. 21 officers and men lost their lives.

All the officers and crew of L.12 survived with the exception of three.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

The following is an extract from the covering letter forwarding the Court of Enquiry's report to the Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth Admiral Sir Roger Keyes. The letter was signed by R.B. Drake, Captain, and J.A.G. Group, Captain, and dated 15th July 1929.

Court held at Fort Blockhouse, Gosport.

24 witnesses

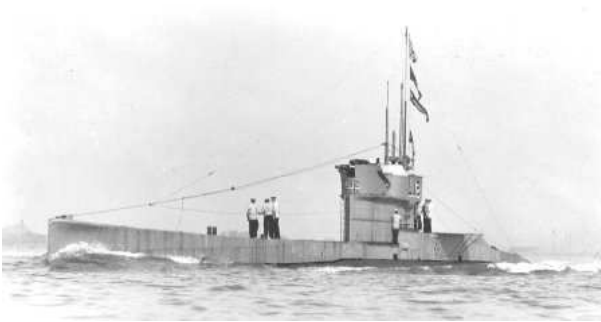
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« The Court is confident that the narrative of these proceedings will reveal as fine an example of heroism and steadiness under desperate conditions as can be found. The command of L.12 was taken over by Lieutenant F.W. LIPSCOMB, a young officer of 25 years of age, taken over and correctly carried out in a sinking submarine with water pouring in, light failing and chlorine gas escaping. In the engine-room, in darkness and with the belief that L.12 had gone to the bottom, the behaviour of some nine men imprisoned there was excellent. The Court holds the view that the gallantry and resource displayed should be recalled long after the memory of any necessary trials into this disaster shall have dissolved away. »

Lieutenant Lipscomb was subsequently promoted to Lieutenant-Commander, and was the youngest serving officer of this rank in the Royal Navy at that time.

He was awarded the O.B.E. Military by King George V. There was no higher distinction for bravery in the Armed Forces during peacetime at that time. Years later he was offered to replace his O.B.E. by the George Medal, one of the very highest military awards. With characteristic modesty, he declined.


## Her Majesty's Submarine L 12



History	
	
Name:	HMS L12
Builder:	Vickers Limited, Barrow-in-Furness
Laid down:	22 January 1917
Commissioned:	30 June 1918
Fate:	Sold for scrapping, 16 February 1932
General characteristics	
Class and type:	L-class submarine
Displacement:	914 long tons (929 t) surfaced 1,089 long tons (1,106 t) submerged
Length:	238 ft 7 in (72.7 m)
Beam:	23 ft 6 in (7.2 m)
Draught:	13 ft 3 in (4.0 m)
Installed power:	2,400 bhp (1,800 kW) (diesel) 1,600 hp (1,200 kW) (electric)
Propulsion:	2 × diesel engines 2 × electric motors
Speed:	17 knots (31 km/h; 20 mph) surfaced 10.5 knots (19.4 km/h; 12.1 mph) submerged
Range:	3,800 nmi (7,000 km; 4,400 mi) at 10 knots (19 km/h; 12 mph) on the surface
Test depth:	150 feet (45.7 m)
Complement:	38
Armament:	4 × bow 21 in (533 mm) torpedo tubes 2 × beam 18 in (457 mm) torpedo tubes 1 × 4-inch deck gun 16 mines

## Her Majesty's Submarine L 47



History	
	
Name:	HMS H47
Builder:	William Beardmore and Company, Dalmuir
Laid down:	20 November 1917
Commissioned:	25 February 1919
Fate:	Sunk, 9 July 1929
General characteristics	
Class and type:	H class submarine
Displacement:	423 long tons (430 t) surfaced 510 long tons (518 t) submerged
Length:	171 ft 0 in (52.12 m)
Beam:	15 ft 4 in (4.67 m)
Propulsion:	1 × 480 hp (358 kW) diesel engine 2 × 620 hp (462 kW) electric motors
Speed:	11.5 knots (21.3 km/h; 13.2 mph) surfaced 9 knots (17 km/h; 10 mph) submerged
Range:	2,985 nmi (5,528 km) at 7.5 kn (13.9 km/h; 8.6 mph) surfaced 130 nmi (240 km) at 2 kn (3.7 km/h; 2.3 mph) submerged
Complement:	22
Armament:	4 × 21 in (533 mm) bow torpedo tubes 8 × 21 inch torpedoes