

Information Data Sheet

Category Torpedoes

Description The importance of the sea lanes in the English Channel and the Northern and Southern Approaches to the UK meant that they were regularly patrolled by German submarines and surface ships that fired torpedoes during WWI and WWII.

There are no records of the total numbers of these that were fired and torpedoes were also dropped from aircraft attacking shipping and over practice ranges during training.



Torpedoes being loaded onto aircraft during WWII

During both WWI and WWII the Germans developed torpedoes of the wet heater type which were steam driven, with kerosene as fuel and compressed air providing oxygen for combustion. Warheads of around 250kg were detonated by means of a direct impact (WWI and WWII) or magnetic fuze (WWII).

In WWI torpedo aiming and fuzing were often unreliable and torpedoes that missed their target would have sunk to the seabed with a live warhead once their propellant had been exhausted.

WWII warheads were filled with 280kg of Hexanite and whilst the reliability was better, aiming was equally difficult.

In WWII the Germans also developed a series of battery-driven torpedoes with similar sized warheads.

The standard British airborne torpedo for World War II was the 18" torpedo, a 450 mm-diameter design that initially had an explosive charge of 388lb (176kg) of TNT. Later versions such as the Mk XV, which was frequently used during the second half of WWII, had a 247kg Torpex warhead. Their ranges varied between 2.3km and 3.2km.

As well as submarines, most British ships of any size were fitted with torpedo launchers which fired the British 21" heavyweight torpedo. The Mk VIII was used on ships, submarines and motor torpedo boats from 1927 and was the first British burner-cycle torpedo. Depending on the variant, the warhead consisted of 325kg to 365kg Torpex.



Hazard Torpedoes may be encountered in most waters around the UK. They are more likely to be found in areas of submarine activity and where naval battles took place, or within the extents of former firing ranges.

Some torpedoes have been known to wash up on shore and others have been trawled or hooked by anchors in deeper water.