

Lest We Forget

**Remembering HM Submarine *Olympus*, lost off Malta 8 May 1942,
with the loss of 89 lives**

The greatest submarine tragedy of the Second World War



Original Memorial to HMS Olympus, at Ta' Xbiex Sea Front, opposite Manoel Island



Peace is not bestowed, it is achieved through sacrifice
(photographs by David Vassallo, 29 December 2017)



HMS Talbot (The Lazaretto, Manoel Island), base of the 10th Submarine Flotilla, Malta (IWM)



*HMS Olympus in Ta' Xbiex creek
(photograph downloaded from Heritage Malta, <https://heritagemalta.org/hms-olympus/>)*

HMS Olympus

HMS *Olympus* was an Odin class submarine, designed for long-distance patrolling and measuring 84 metres in length and 9 metres in beam, launched in December 1928. Her Second World War patrols in the Far East and Mediterranean are well documented on the website uboat.net, sourced from Admiralty records in The National Archives.¹

She had arrived in Malta from Gibraltar (under command of Lt Cdr Herbert George Dymott, RN) on 3 May 1942 on her fifth ‘magic carpet’ storage trip to the Island in six months, carrying essential fuel and torpedoes.² During these first six critical months of 1942, as Kesselring’s Luftwaffe pounded the Island relentlessly in preparation for invasion in the summer, Allied convoys were unable to reach Malta. Three merchant ships managed to arrive in harbour in January, but only two merchant ship cargoes were successfully unloaded in February - July due to the tempo and ferocity of Luftwaffe bombing.

HMS *Olympus* departed Malta for the return trip to Gibraltar under cover of darkness in the early hours of 8 May.³ She was carrying on board the surviving crews of three other submarines (P39, P36 and HMS *Pandora*) that had been sunk by heavy enemy bombing in harbour between 26 March and 1 April. While trying to avoid newly laid minefields (some 54,000 mines were reportedly laid by the Italians in Malta’s waters) she tragically hit a mine on the surface some seven miles off Valletta and sank shortly afterwards.

Though many of the 98 men on board succeeded in leaving the submarine alive, they could not manage to fire her gun or set off distress flares in the few minutes available to them to attract the attention of coastal observers, who in any case might have been distracted by the ongoing air raid. No search-and-rescue craft were despatched. Only nine crew members survived the long and chilly swim to shore, taking them some five hours to swim to safety.⁴

The bodies of ten crew members were later washed ashore and buried at Capuccini Naval Cemetery, Kalkara.

¹ HMS Olympus (N 35) <https://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/3395.html> (accessed 7 May 2022)

² The National Archives. ADM 199/2564

³ The National Archives. ADM 199/1217

⁴ HMS Olympus: a tale of tragedy and heroes <https://the-past.com/feature/hms-olympus-a-tale-of-tragedy-and-heroes/> (accessed 7 May 1942)



Stoker William Thomas Davis RN, one of the crew of HMS Olympus buried at Kalkara
(photograph downloaded from <https://the-past.com/feature/hms-olympus-a-tale-of-tragedy-and-heroes/>)

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The search for the wreck of HMS *Olympus*

2008 – a false trail. The tragedy of HMS *Olympus*, and the search for her wreck, have long held a fascination for marine archaeologists and divers. One particular team of technical divers, led by Mark Powell of Dive-Tech in the UK together with Stuart Jones and Jonathan Thomas of Tec Deep Blue in Malta, initially thought they had discovered the wreck on 7 May 2008, reporting their findings on uboat.net two days later.⁵ During their 12-minute dive in very low visibility conditions this team identified features which appeared consistent with the layout of HMS *Olympus*, though they could not definitively confirm the identity and planned to return. To their disappointment, their return dive, under much better visibility conditions a few days later, showed that the wreck was definitely not a submarine but more likely a vessel sunk during the First World War. They therefore discounted their own initial claim, in a report to Yorkshire Divers Forum on 17 May.⁶

2011 – The discovery. The wreck of HMS *Olympus* was finally discovered in 2011, lying upright on sandy mud at a depth of 115 metres, during a systematic high-frequency sonar survey of the seabed by a team led by Timothy Gambin, Professor of Maritime Archaeology at the University of Malta, in approximate position 35°55'N, 14°35'E. Images taken by a

⁵ HMS Olympus found off Malta in 115m (posted by Mark Powell, 9 May 2008)
<https://www.uboard.net/forums/read.php?3,77084,77084> (accessed 7 May 2022; see next footnote)

⁶ Wreck at 115m in Malta remains unidentified | YD Scuba Diving Forums (yorkshire-divers.com)
<https://www.yorkshire-divers.com/threads/wreck-at-115m-in-malta-remains-unidentified.71668/> (accessed 12 May 2022 – the author is grateful to Professor Timmy Gambin for bringing this to his attention)

remotely operated vehicle (ROV) confirmed that the wreck was indeed of HMS *Olympus*.⁷ Professor Gambin recounted the story of HMS *Olympus* and its discovery in the annual Andrew Vella Memorial Lecture at the University of Malta in December 2013, publishing this in detail in *Storja 2015*, the re-launched journal of the Malta University Historical Society.⁸

2017. An international team led by Professor Gambin returned to dive on the wreck for the 75th anniversary of the sinking, in May 2017, placing a memorial plaque next to the conning tower in remembrance of the 89 men who lost their lives in this tragic event.⁹



Memorial plaque laid on the wreck of HMS Olympus, May 2017
(photograph downloaded from Heritage Malta, <https://heritagemalta.org/hms-olympus/>)

Other 75th anniversary services were also organised. A remembrance service over the wreck was held on board one of the vessels of the Maritime Squadron from the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM). This special event was attended by the British High Commissioner, Stuart Gill, and by serving crew members of HMS *Vengeance* and HMS *Artful*.

⁷ HMS Olympus: a tale of tragedy and heroes <https://the-past.com/feature/hms-olympus-a-tale-of-tragedy-and-heroes/> (accessed 7 May 2022)

⁸ HMS Olympus: A Tale of Tragedy and Heroics. *Storja 2015* (University of Malta), pp.111-120 <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/25163> (accessed 12 May 2022)

⁹ HMS Olympus Dive with Timmy Gambin - Bremont Watch Company (YouTube) <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=hms+olympus&docid=608017780006523668&mid=C791E0B3C9148AA28092C791E0B3C9148AA28092&view=detail&FORM=VIRE> (accessed 7 May 2022)

In the evening, a memorial designed by local architect Patrick Calleja and facilitated by Professor Gambin was unveiled on Ta' Xbiex seafront, opposite Manoel Island, in the presence of the Royal Navy submariners, with a guard of honour provided by the AFM.¹⁰



Original HMS Olympus memorial (Photograph by James Licari, May 2017)

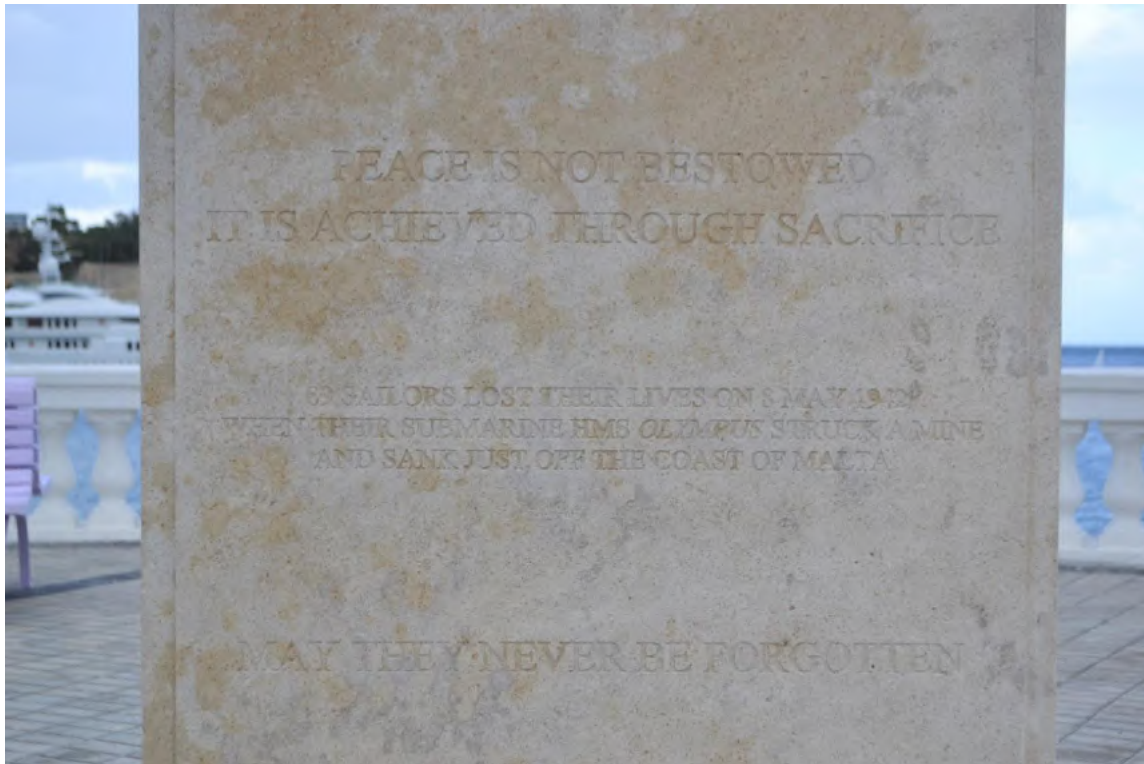
<https://the-past.com/feature/hms-olympus-a-tale-of-tragedy-and-heroes/>



Information tablet (erected 2024 next to site of original HMS Olympus memorial).

The date for the storm that destroyed the monument is incorrect, it was 24 February 2018

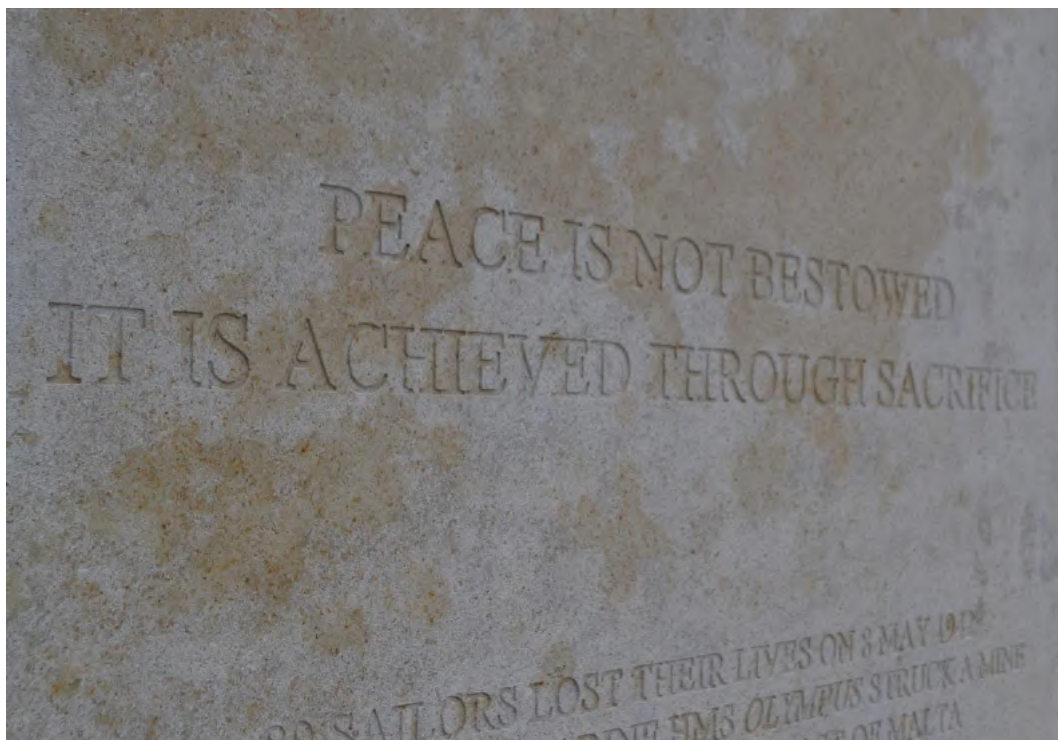
¹⁰ Royal Navy News (18 July 2017) - HMS Olympus Memorial <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2017/july/18/170718-hms-olympus-memorial> (accessed 7 May 2022)

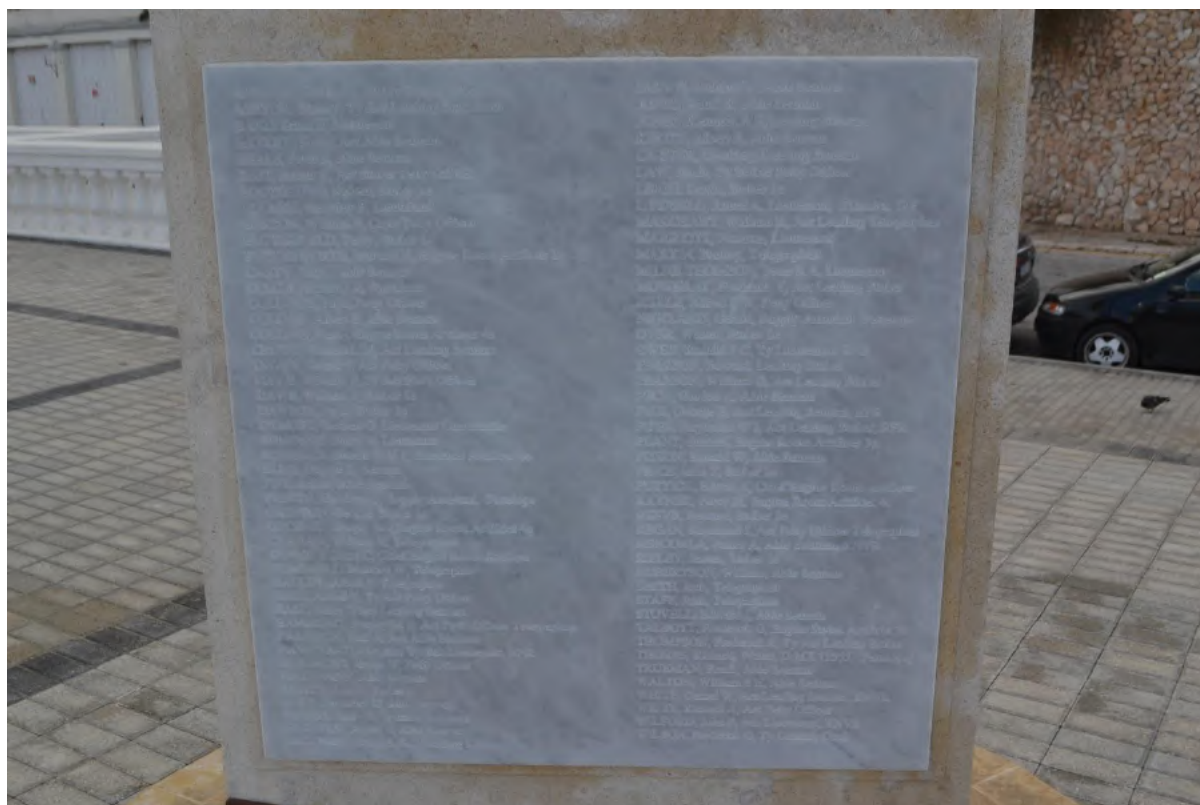


Peace is not bestowed, It is achieved through sacrifice

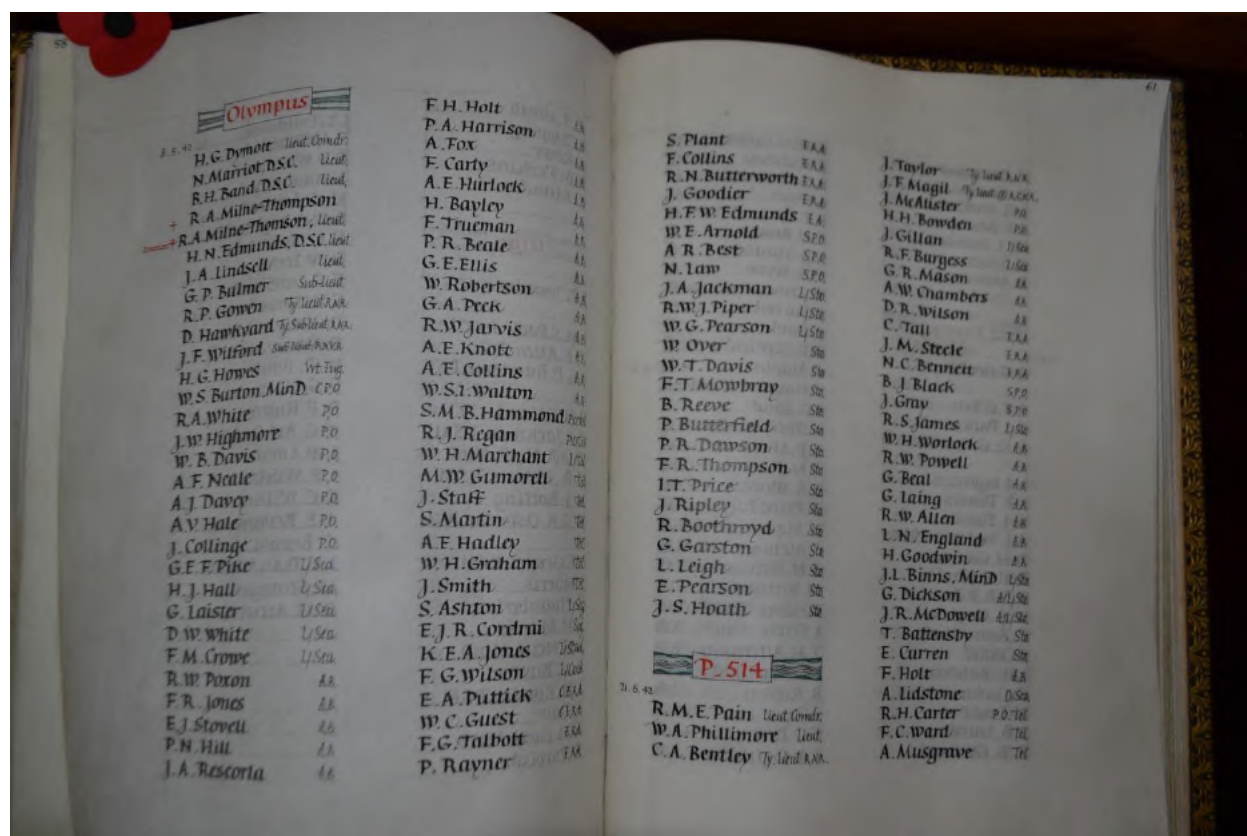
***89 sailors lost their lives on 8 May 1942
when their submarine HMS Olympus struck a mine
and sank just off the coast of Malta***

May they never be forgotten





The 89 sailors lost on 8 May 1942 (marble tablet at back of original HMS Olympus memorial)



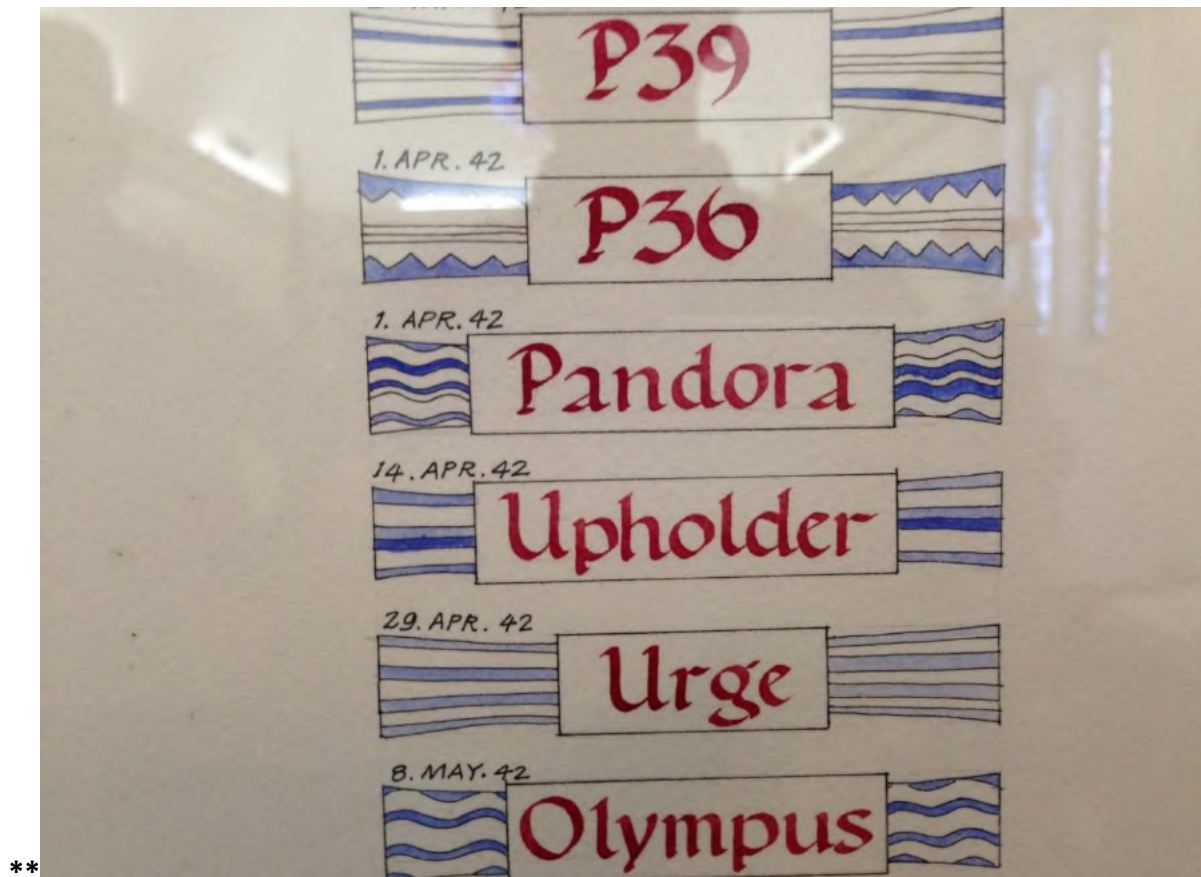
*Still on Patrol – The crew of HMS Olympus
(Book of Remembrance, HM Submarines Memorial Chapel, Gosport)*



Commemorative panel for HMS Olympus and all those lost on 8 May 1942

(RN Submarine Memorial, Submarine Museum Gosport

(downloaded from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/submarinemuseum/albums/72157631804518267/>)



*Submarine Losses at Malta, 26 March - 8 May 1942
(Detail from 'HM Submarines Lost on Service', Book of Remembrance,
HM Submarines Memorial Chapel, Gosport)*

HMS P 39

HMS P 39 (Lt N. Marriott, DSC, RN) was a U Class submarine, launched in August 1941, that arrived in Malta on 11 February 1942 to join the 10th Submarine Flotilla. She was badly damaged in an air raid on Malta on 6 March, and temporarily beached at Kalkara Creek where emergency repairs were commenced. During a further heavy air raid on Malta Dockyard in the afternoon of 26 March she was heavily damaged by near misses, and her back was broken.¹¹

HMS P36

P36 (Lt. Harry Noel Edmonds, DSC, RN) was a U class submarine, launched in April 1941, that joined the 10th Submarine Flotilla in Malta in January 1942. She was wrecked in harbour by heavy bombing on 1 April 1942, fortunately with no casualties.¹² Her wreck remained visible below the Lazaretto until she was raised, towed out to sea and sunk in deep water in 1958.

¹¹ HMS P39 <https://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/3549.html>

¹² HMS P36 <https://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/3546.html>

HMS Pandora

HMS Pandora (Lt R.L. Alexander, RN) was a P class submarine, launched in August 1929, that arrived in Malta from Gibraltar on 31 March 1942 with a load of kerosene, on her second 'magic carpet' storage trip to the Island. She was bombed and sunk on 1 April while unloading supplies at Hamilton Wharf in the Grand Harbour, receiving a direct hit. Two officers and twenty-three ratings died in the attack.¹³ Her wreck was raised in September 1943 and beached in Kalkara Creek, eventually being scrapped in 1957. Whilst breaking the wreck up two bodies were found in a dry compartment.¹⁴

The lecture theatre at the RN Submarine School at HMS *Dolphin* (Fort Blockhouse), Gosport was named 'Pandora Theatre' in her honour.

Original Epilogue (written 8 May 2022)

Alas, the memorial to HMS Olympus is no more, having only lasted nine months before the greater forces of nature overwhelmed it. On 24 February 2018 a ferocious Gregale with hurricane force winds (one of the infamous north-easterly winter storms that has shipwrecked many a vessel on Malta's shores, not least that carrying St Paul in AD 60) uprooted hundreds of trees and cracked the memorial across at its base. Its shattered fragments were removed by local council workers within days, perhaps lost since but not forgotten.

Five years later, and the memorial had still not been replaced. Perhaps this is a matter of out of sight, out of mind, with initiative, determination, political will, and funding all needed before a stronger and more durable monument is erected in its stead.

The different design of a recently erected monument at Fort St Elmo, for another submarine lost to a mine 80 years ago, HMS Urge, 27 April 1942, may well reflect a lesson learned.^{15,16}

In the meantime, a raised circular base is all that remains of the monument at Ta' Xbiex, bearing silent testimony to the bravery of the 89 sailors of HMS Olympus, P39, P36 and HMS Pandora that lost their lives off Valletta on 8 May 1942.

Their sacrifice will not be forgotten.

¹³ John Wingate. *The Fighting Tenth (The Tenth Submarine Flotilla and the Siege of Malta)* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991), pp.167-169

¹⁴ HMS Pandora. <https://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/3404.html>

¹⁵ HMS Urge Memorial Unveiled in Malta (Friends of the Royal Navy Submarine website) <https://www.rnsubmusfriends.org.uk/hms-urge-memorial-unveiled-in-malta/> (accessed 8 May 2022)

¹⁶ Heritage Malta - President George Vella unveils a monument commemorating HMS Urge at Fort St Elmo <https://heritagemalta.org/president-george-vella-unveils-monument-hms-urge-fse/> (accessed 8 May 2022)

New Epilogue (12 June 2026)

In early 2024, a new memorial was erected to HMS *Olympus*, and another to HMS *Upholder* (lost 14 April 1942), alongside and in the same style as the memorial to their sister submarine HMS *Urge* at the Submarine Memorial Walkway at Fort St Elmo.

Beneath the memorial to HMS *Upholder*, a marble plaque was erected in memory of all 33 British and Allied submarines operating from Malta which had been lost in World War Two.





The new memorial to HMS Olympus at Fort St Elmo, aligned to her distant wreck

Managing the war graves

The Government of Malta, aware of its responsibility for the proper management and protection of underwater war graves such as that of HMS *Olympus*, has in recent years created the Underwater Cultural Heritage Unit (UCHU) within Heritage Malta, the national agency for the management of Malta's cultural heritage collections, sites and museums. The UCHU enables fifteen such sites to be protected and only accessed by divers in a controlled and managed manner. Details are on the Heritage Malta website.¹⁷



*The approximate locations of some of Malta's deep-water wrecks.
Access is strictly controlled through the Underwater Cultural Heritage Unit.*

¹⁷ Heritage Malta – Underwater Cultural Heritage Unit <https://heritagemalta.org/underwater-cultural-heritage-unit/> (accessed 7 May 2022). This has a section relating to HMS Olympus.



Marble tablet at base of spire of St Paul's Anglican Pro-Cathedral, Valletta, facing Manoel Island and the home of the 10th Submarine Flotilla



At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we shall remember them

Photograph credits

All photographs herein were taken by David Vassallo except where otherwise credited.

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