



Exmoor

Nazi U-boat Crew Played Secret Soccer On Exmoor's Edge

This article was written and researched by Martin Hesp in 2003.

The German football team may have had a bumpy ride getting to the 2006 year World Cup but, as usual, it was their unshakeable self-confidence that won them through. The same confidence perhaps, that inspired Nazi soccer enthusiasts to play on British soil during the Second World War.

The clandestine matches, which were no more than a kick-about, are only just coming to light - at the time no one knew that enemy forces were anywhere near the English coast, let alone playing football.

They were sub-mariners from the notorious Wolf Pack U-boats that patrolled the Atlantic Approaches. The one thing these craft ran short of during their long sojourns at sea was freshwater - and captains were loathe to return to their distant bases to replenish their tanks. The answer was to find a source on the nearby western coasts of the British Isles.

Exmoor's remote and vertiginous coastline, dripping with secluded waterfalls and fringed by deepwater, offered the ideal location. So ideal that the story of the covert U-boat visits is only just coming to light. For years many local folk have been renouncing the rumours - perhaps in an attempt to cover-up the ineptitude of Exmoor's answer to Captain Mainwaring. After all, Nazi U-boats were very big prizes indeed in those dark days, and the idea that they could pull in and help themselves to freshwater whenever they pleased would embarrass even the artless platoon in TV's *Dad's Army*.

«It's not legend - the U-boats really did come here. It's a fact,» says 90-year-old Les Gear of Ilfracombe, who was the first person I came across who was willing to allow his name to be used in conjunction with the story. «A friend of mine was a pleasure boat skipper and one day, after the war, he was asked by a German tourist if he could take him out to Sherrycombe Falls.

«'Why?' asks my mate. 'Because I used to take my U-boat in there for freshwater in the dead of night - but now I'd like to see the place in the daylight,' says the German. Turned out he was the captain of a Nazi submarine.

«I've met his son Wolfgang - twice,» added Les. «And he told me his father used to come back here to visit the beautiful coast he'd last seen during the war. Back then he was living on an island somewhere off the Danish coast - but I don't know if

he's still alive now. Anyway, it proves the rumours were true and if you ever go to Sherrycombe you can imagine it happening - it would be more or less impossible for anyone to spot a U-boat or anything else anchored under Holdstone Down.»

Mr Gear is right. The coastal region east of Combe Martin - beyond Wild Pear Beach and the Little and Great Hangman hills - is the wildest stretch of shoreline to be found anywhere in England. High moors give way to dizzying drops of 800 feet or more, and the cliffs are studded with deep, dark ravines. Far below, the boulder-strewn beach is unvisited by anything save for gulls and guillemots and a few crazy rock-climbers who risk life and limb exploring the honeycomb of sea-caves that perforate the cliffs.

You could hardly blame the local Home Guard for missing a submarine that came and went during the black of night. Even in daylight you'd need a helicopter to spot anyone down at sea-level.

Following up the story of the Nazi subs resulted in stories that grew ever more bizarre. There are several unlikely tales of secret Nazi visits to the more remote parts of Exmoor and North Devon - such as the one about U-boat crews strolling through the streets of seaside resort Combe Martin to get their washing done. But as none of the story-tellers would allow me to print their name, I have discounted most of the tales with a large pinch of salt.

However, Croyde chimney sweep Keith Howes was quite happy to repeat his yarn about the mysterious German businessman. «It was about 15 years ago that I was cleaning the chimneys at Hunter's Inn, and when I was finished I was looking for the landlord, but there was no-one about - with the exception of one man,» said Keith.

«He had a strong German accent and he was sitting there with a beer, so we got talking. He told me that he was a successful businessman and he was at last fulfilling an ambition to come back here after all these years. He explained that he had first come to the Exmoor coast as a crew member in a U-boat during the war, and that the main task was to collect freshwater.

«He said they had a chart with quite a few places on it, but this was one of their favourite haunts because it was so remote. The only thing they were worried about was getting spotted by a plane. Anyway, these submarines were apparently dreadful things - they were very cramped and they stank of diesel and battery acid. So the crew were only too keen to get out and come ashore for some fresh air and exercise. «The German told me they would take it in turns coming onto the beach and, once they'd got the water, they'd run about and sometimes they'd role up some overalls and use it as a football so they could have a kick about.

«Lastly, he told me he had been so fascinated by the place that he'd walked a little way along the path which leads up the valley. He didn't dare go too far, but he knew there was something up there and he made it his ambition to come back and find out what. And so he was very pleased to find the

path ended at Hunter's Inn - and that's where he was - sitting there having a drink.»

Dave Tithecott, (then manager at Hunter's Inn - one of England's most isolated public houses) told me: «Oh yes - seems to be common knowledge around here that the German's came to collect water. But I must say, we haven't heard the one about the football match before.» «I can certainly vouch for what Les Gear has told you,» says Alan Kift, of Ilfracombe. «I was the boatman who took the submarine captain's son, Wolfgang, up the coast and he told me how his father had come back in the early 1950's to see the beautiful coastline that he visited secretly during the war.

«I looked into the subject after that,» added Mr Kift, «and found that seven or eight U-boats used to come into the Bristol Channel on a regular basis. I've got all their numbers somewhere, and I know this: not one of them survived the war, so Wolfgang's father and the footballing bloke were both lucky to have lived to tell the tale.»