1914 2014

WORLD WAR ONE

BBC

1918 2018

How did an artist use Cubism to fight the war at sea?

Video transcript – The art of confusion

Norman Wilkinson's dazzle camouflage was certainly eye-catching. So how could it possibly help a ship avoid being torpedoed?

Wilkinson never expected for his camouflage to hide a ship, but to confuse a U-boat commander before he'd even fired his torpedoes When the periscope broke through the surface of the water, he would have only seconds to locate his target and fire.

He had to be quick to avoid being spotted. U-boats were very vulnerable, and merchant ships were often armed to protect themselves. A ship was a moving target. To score a hit, he had to fire the torpedo ahead of the vessel.

Wilkinson wanted dazzle camouflage to make this more difficult. Its contrasting colours and shapes broke up a ship's form. This would make it more difficult for a U-boat to work out a ship's speed and direction.

The Admiralty made Wilkinson the head of a new dazzle camouflage section. He assembled a team of artists and model-makers at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. They created hundreds of unique camouflage patterns.

One of the camouflaged vessels was the small warship HMS M33, here at Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. She has been restored to her dazzle scheme.

Built in 1915, she served during the Gallipoli Campaign, and is one of three surviving British warships from World War One.

Wilkinson's camouflage was also rolled out across Britain's merchant fleet. It also impressed the American Navy, who applied it to their own ships. One US newspaper described their fleet as a "flock of sea-going Easter eggs".

With images from the Imperial War Museum, Getty, Topfoto