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

Video transcript – Wilkinson's dazzling idea

In 1917 Britain and her allies were losing hundreds of ships every month to German U-boats. These deadly submarines patrolled the waters of the United Kingdom watching for ships to destroy.

Their main targets were the merchant ships carrying the food and military supplies that sustained the allied war effort. It was vital to defend this cargo. Without it, Britain's war would be lost.

An English artist, named Norman Wilkinson, had a remarkable idea to protect these ships from the U-Boat threat.

During his wartime service in the Navy, Wilkinson realised it was impossible to conceal vessels effectively at sea. Most were painted a uniform shade of black or grey.

We commonly associate military camouflage with using neutral colours to blend in to the natural world.

The weather at sea, particularly around the British coasts, constantly changes. And so no single pattern of camouflage could hide these ships from a U-Boat's periscope.

Wilkinson's idea looked more like something from a cubist painting. Sweeping lines, large geometric shapes and violent contrasts of colour. It became known as dazzle camouflage. So how did Wilkinson use art to fight the war at sea?

With images from the Norman Wilkinson Estate, Imperial War Museum, Getty, Topfoto