

The Ashkhabad is a 401 foot long Russian tanker that is in 55 feet of water. About 22 miles southeast of the Beaufort Inlet, it usually takes about an hour to reach this dive site after leaving the inlet. The high parts of this wreck are the boilers and the condenser. It makes a nice second dive after a deeper dive. Some of the ribs of the ship can also be seen in the section fore of the boilers. Deck plates and twisted beams are scattered about the wreck.

During the summer, the water temperature ranges from the upper 70's to the low 80's. Because it is close to the shoals, visibility averages 30 feet, but can get up to 40-50 feet. The ship rests on a nice sandy bottom. Sheephead, triggerfish, sea bass, and spadefish frequent his wreck. Moderate currents are common to this wreck.

The Ashkhabad had several previous names such as, the Dneprostroi, the Kutais, the Mistley Hall, the Aldersgate, the Milazzo, and the War Hostage. She was originally constructed as a freighter, but was converted to a tanker to carry fuel oil. The ship had a crew of 47, three of which were women. On April 26, 1942, the Ashkhabad left New York on her way to Cuba. The night sky on April 29, 1942 was clear and had a full moon that allowed six miles of visibility. The HMS Lady Elsa was escorting the Ashkhabad on her journey. In accordance to Navy regulations, both ships were zigzagging.

At 9:50, the HMS Lady Elsa spotted a U-Boat that was 500 yards off the starboard side of the Ashkhabad. None of the crew on watch aboard the Ashkhabad saw the U-Boat. The HMS Lady Elsa fired one shot that caused the U-402 to dive for cover, but not before firing a single torpedo. The torpedo hit on the starboard side just below the waterline in the No. 4 hold. The No. 4 hold, the deep tank, and the engine room flooded. Even though the Ashkhabad didn't have any watertight doors, only the stern of the ship flooded.

The U-402 partially surfaced about 500 yards off of the starboard side of the ship. The crew of the Ashkhabad, fired three shots from the forward .30-caliber gun, but all three missed. An hour after the attack, Captain Alexy Pavlovitch put all of his code books in a weighted box and sank them. Then he gave the order to abandon ship. The HMS Lady Elsa picked up all of the crew and took them to Morehead City.

At 10:00 a.m. the next morning, the crew from the HMS Hertfordshire, a British armed trawler, boarded the Ashkhabad and "salvaged" valuable navigational equipment and clothes. At 3:00 p.m., Captain Pavlovitch, some of the crew, and a Fifth Naval District Intelligence Officer returned to the Ashkhabad to find that it had been looted. The HMS Hertfordshire had already left the area.

The next day the Russians returned to their ship again and this time they were early enough to catch the HMS Hertfordshire tied up to the Ashkhabad. The British were removing all of the loose items from the ship. They were told that she was not abandoned and salvage tugs were on the way and the British returned all of the items that they had taken.

On May 3, 1942, the USS Semmes, a destroyer, came upon the Ashkhabad and determined that she was abandoned and a navigational hazard and fired three rounds from her 3-inch guns. The hits caused the midship superstructure to catch fire. Seeing the fire, the HMS St. Zeno went to the Ashkhabad. The HMS St. Zeno fired a shot at the Ashkhabad, under the authorization of

the commanding officer of the HMS Hertfordshire, who was in command of all British armed trawlers at Morehead City. His explanation was that he thought the HMS St. Zeno might sink the Ashkhabad and extinguish the fire, which he considered a menace to a large convoy expected in the vicinity.

When the Navy tug, Relief, arrived to tow the Ashkhabad to shore for salvage, the ship was already a total loss. In 1943 and 1944, the Ashkhabad was blasted with explosives because it was a navigational hazard.