



WILLIAM DART AND THE ENZELI EXPEDITION

William Dart – lived at the Platt, Dormansland and at the age of 17 in 1914 he enlisted in the Navy for 12 years. He served in the Battle of Jutland on HMS Benbow which was part of the Grand Fleet under Admiral Jellicoe. In 1920 he was in the Mediterranean Fleet and as a member of the Naval Party captured by the Bolsheviks in Baku he experienced an extremely unpleasant and dangerous six months.

Changing names of places and countries - This can be confusing. The names and spellings used in the text are the same as those in the documents etc. at the time.

The Background – After the War the British Government supported the White Russians and by 1919 the Royal Navy, under Commodore David Norse, had built up a flotilla of ships when it had taken control of the Caspian Sea from the Soviet Navy. Britain then withdrew, handing over eight Armed Merchant Cruisers to General Denikin's Volunteer Army. In 1920 their base was threatened by the Red Army and the flotilla of 14 ships in total sailed to Enzeli on the North Persian coast, taking both the Persian Government and the British Army by surprise. The Persians disarmed the ships and interned them and the Army asked for Naval assistance. A party of volunteers – five officers and 26 ratings – was sent, despite the strong misgivings of the overall Commanding Officer, Admiral John de Robeck.

While this trouble was developing William was with his ship, HMS Gardenia, which had spent a month evacuating people from places threatened by the Bolshevik advance and was now returning to the shore establishment at Constantinople where the sailors were hoping to relax, blissfully unaware of what lay ahead until they docked and found there was panic, trying to get everything in order for a visit from the Admiral.

The Naval Mission – When the Admiral arrived he said he needed volunteers, all of whom had to be single men. It is not exactly clear what was planned. The men were under the impression it was simply to check the seaworthiness of the ships and the composition of the party would seem to confirm this but the Admiral had been reluctant to agree to their going and the 'single men only' rule implies he was expecting difficulties or more was to be undertaken than had been admitted.

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The mission was led by Commander Bruce Fraser. There was one lieutenant, two sub-lieutenants and a gunnery officer plus 26 NCOs and other ranks with a variety of skills, including a sick berth steward who was going to have a very busy time.

The rest of the story is a combination of the official versions and that of Leading Seaman William Hutchings whose account was found in a notebook at the Imperial War Museum, plus newspaper accounts and Government reports

The Journey – The party set off for Batoum and there now started a series of events which seemed as if something was warning them to turn back while they could. Hutchings writes that the journey was “uneventful except for sinking a mine and colliding with a French oiler.” The Admiral on his flag ship was bringing the supplies and ammunition but was delayed and the sailors spent the time cleaning out goods wagons which were to be ‘home’ for about a week. Finally supplies arrived and a large work party transferred them to a lighter and then to the wagons. These were then hooked up to a train but news that a bridge it would have to pass over had been blown up caused a further delay. A party of Royal Engineers was sent out to inspect the damage and returned to say it would take them a month to repair. Hutchings remarks that the Admiral had them gathered round, reminded them of the great traditions of the Royal Navy and then said they would be taken as far as the bridge and would then transfer everything to a train on the other side. Everything was taken over safely – except for the ammunition which had to be left “which caused some regret”. (It is not clear whether the transfer was made by boat or the bridge was safe to walk over).

Finally the Azerbaijan/Georgian border was reached but the driver of a train arriving from Baku warned he had been fired on so Commander Fraser had to use his revolver to persuade their reluctant driver to proceed.

On the 27th April the party finally arrived at Baku to find the ship they needed to reach Enzeli had left and there was no other.

Overnight the invading Bolsheviks arrived and not only was the naval party arrested, so was a large party of local people, particularly business men and shopkeepers, officials, diplomatic staff from various countries, plus any other foreigners. All were first taken to the notorious Cheresvichaika. The Naval Party were there for two days, in an airless overcrowded room and Hutchings described how from time to time an official would enter a room and give an individual a sheet of paper which was a death warrant. “It was pitiful watching them trying to keep a brave face”, he writes. The sailors were also beginning to wonder what their fate would be.

They were moved – to the Bailoff Prison. Anything that had not already been taken from them was now removed and they were led to three cells about 10 feet by 10 feet, with a barred window about 10 feet from the floor, about 5 feet square on the inside tapering through the 5 feet thick walls to 2 feet on the outside. Very little light got through. There was a hole in the heavy door 5 inches square. The stench was appalling, the whole place was verminous and more packets were pushed through the gratings. There were boards about 5 feet long, 2 feet wide for sleeping. There were 14 men in Hutchings’ cell – 12 sailors plus two other prisoners, another Englishman and one of

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Denikin's sailors. They found they could sleep if seven men laid head to the wall on one side and seven did the same the other side, legs to the middle of the room, but there was no room to turn in their sleep.

Commander Fraser's report adds more detail – another party which included the British Vice Consul and the Army Commanding Officer, Major Connal Rowan arrived with others of high authority who were placed in a fourth cell, some of them condemned to be shot. Twice transport arrived for them and each time the executions were postponed.

There were now 50 people in the four small cells; three filthy latrines for 350 prisoners and one trough and tap in an exercise courtyard which was 40 yards square. Food – one pound of black bread per head with a little rice. Sanitary arrangements in the cell was one leaking bucket. The prisoners were allowed out into a small courtyard for 30 minutes each evening.

The Admiralty heard of the arrests on the 5th May. The Naval Party stayed in those cells from the 2nd May to the 15th August before being moved to somewhat better accommodation.

Back in England questions were being asked in Parliament regarding what steps the Government were taking to ensure the release of the sailors – the reply was that the Government had no reason to suppose the men were being ill-treated – “They have been seen playing a football”. This information must have been passed on by a Mr Seaman who was charged with watching the care of the men. Hutchings description of the football: “We had to stop.....after fasting for a week or so we didn't feel equal to it so cricket was played, the bat was some old wood, the ball made of rags and the prison wall was the wicket. Then the weather got hotter and with our belts drawn in as far as possible we just sat about yawning....with a bit of leap frog racing. Our evenings after lock-up were spent singing and the Commander started some classes but as the weather became hotter, men began to be affected by illnesses and the classes ended.” “Then the Government sent money to Mr Seaman and he arranged for food to be sent in to us – only a taster but having lived hungry for weeks it was fine.”

More questions were being asked in Parliament – how was it that our men were still prisoners when all but two of the French had been released?

The Government had a number of problems – some of them similar to those which caused so much suffering for the army in the wartime Mesopotamia Campaign – concern for our oil interests in Persia and Mesopotamia. Concern too that trouble in the Black Sea/Caucasian Sea areas could prejudice our administration of Mesopotamia, already in difficulty, worrying about keeping the Suez Canal clear for access to India at the same time keeping the Bolsheviks from India and, just to make it interesting, a trade conference was taking place between the Bolsheviks and Western Europe. The Bolsheviks did not want to “dirty their hands dealing with capitalists”, but it was urgent for them to do so. Britain, of course, would have “nothing to do with them” until the sailors were released but we were virtually bankrupt and did not want to lose the opportunity of trading. So the two sides were playing the pragmatic game. The sailors were an unfortunate inconvenience.

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In the prison things were deteriorating. Mr Hewelcke, had been moved to the condemned cell and told he would be executed. Then he was moved back to the prison. This happened several times, resulting in him becoming ill. Commander Fraser sought the help of the Dutch Ambassador to provide some protection for the Consul. Fraser had also complained regularly trying improve conditions for the party.

Illness was increasing – boils, jaundice, stomach problems. The sick birth steward, Frederick Prout, had no medicines or equipment. He extracted a tooth with a pair of wire nippers and used a safety razor for minor problems. Then they had the first case of malaria. This was Joseph Marsh. During their brief exercise sessions the naval party had made friends with the political prisoners and one, a Polish doctor, helped Prout, bring down the Marsh's temperature by soaking old newspaper and an old shirt. They had nothing else and Hutchings reports the distress of the doctor at not being able to do more for the patient. Marsh was very fortunate and recovered.

Then the executions started. Every night, starting at 11 o'clock, men were shot against the outside wall of the sailors' cells, just below the window, with the flashes coming through the bars and the sound filling the small crowded space. Then one night guns were fired over the prison and the sailors thought a counter-revolution was taking place and there was a chance of their release. They communicated with Commander Fraser using Morse on the cell wall. The next morning they learned the uprising had been quelled, the British Vice-Consul was again threatened with execution and a number of the men with whom the sailors had become friends were among those executed which had a profound effect.

There followed what Hutchings calls "The leanest 14 days we had ever spent". There was no help from outside. The bread ration stopped – the people in the town were starving. Breakfast was one spring onion, two fish about the size of a bloater between 14, eaten uncooked. Dinner was thick rice, tea and ricewater. The Dutch Consul helped but left Baku quickly. An America doctor, a Dr Spore, also helped then he left.

A new tactic was tried – officials visited the sailors and told them their confinement was the fault of their Government and if they would kill their officers they would be released on parole.

Then they were promised that they would all be moved to better surroundings but this promised was delayed over and over again

Now 75% of the party were sick- typhus, jaundice, dysentery and "the loss of our liberty was beginning to get on our nerves".

Shortly after this the account in the notebook finishes abruptly. Perhaps William Hutchings became ill.

Questions were still being asked in Parliament, with Lord Curzon accusing Lloyd George of hampering the efforts to negotiate the sailors' release. Commander Fraser's mother had been in touch with all the next-of-kin which had now formed a self-help group with Mrs Fraser in contact with MPs and circulating any information she received.

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The following details are taken from the official report made by Fraser and Connal Rowen.

There followed a long period of cat and mouse games. On the 16th June the English personnel are told negotiations for their release will start in three days. On the 5th July they are told this will happen in about a week to 10 days. On the 20th and 22nd July they are told they will be moved to better conditions at the Polish School which had been put at their disposal by the Political Mission. On the 30th July they are told they are moving the following day. It happened on the 15th August. The building was in a very poor state and the sailors set about making it more habitable.

On the 2nd September a consignment of stores arrived – milk, soap, towels, boots, soup, medical stores, shirts, socks.

Vice Consul Hewelcke was finally told of an agreement for his release. There were three more typhoid cases. “Nothing could be done for them, but to try to make them comfortable.” It seemed a miracle that so far all the party had survived.

They were finally released on the 4th November and travelled to Tiflis and crossed the frontier on the 7th November – but there was a little more drama about which they were ignorant:-

Admiral de Robeck was on the HMS Calypso at Batoum and had sent a telegram to the Admiralty on the 25th October, 1920 and there was another sent on the 2nd November. Arrangements were being made for what appeared to be secret communication between ships in the event of the Soviets reneging on the exchange details (the Baku prisoners are being released by means of a prisoner exchange). Alarming Robeck asks for permission to bombard Odessa in the event of any problems - “The French found threat effective recently. I submit that extreme measures are fully justified to prevent our prisoners being sent back to Baku when we have clearly shown our good faith in bringing Bolsheviks from Egypt to Turkey to rendezvous off Odessa. I trust this contingency will not arise but wish to be in position to act immediately should it do so.”

On the 3rd November the Admiralty sent a telegram stating that the Bolshevik prisoners were not to be handed over until there is definite information that our prisoners had been released and were in safety – and that the question of reprisals had been referred to the Cabinet and a further communication would be made.

8th November the Admiralty sent a further telegram that all naval and military prisoners and the majority of civilians from Baku, in all 61 persons, have arrived from Tiflis. A few more civilians were to come later. “All Britons in good health.”

That last comment must have been to reassure next-of-kin because it was not true of the naval party. They all needed to be de-loused, scrubbed clean and shaved. Their journey back to the United Kingdom would take almost a month and they were on a strict diet. The ship, the HMS Heliotrope, had to divert to Malta where one member had to be taken to hospital where he died. It seemed so harsh that he had survived until his release and then succumbed to the results of what had been endured.

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The Heliotrope arrived back in Portsmouth on the 1st December to be greeted by their families and Commander Fraser who had returned by a faster route to make his report to the Admiralty. The men were told to be wary of the press and said very little other than that some of the reporting had exaggerated their experience and gave their stringent views on the behaviour of the Bolsheviks.

However, the strain began to show in various ways. Sub-Lieutenant Keighley died in hospital a week after returning. One sailor had asked for early discharge which was refused at the time.

All the men were given three week's leave and subsequently the NCOs and other ranks were all posted to shore bases for anything from 4-6 weeks. There were then four early discharges permitted and probably the early refusal was reversed. When one sailor returned to sea he had to be brought back and was sent to Haslar, the Naval Hospital at Portsmouth. He was suffering from neurasthenia perhaps as a result of the nightly executions beneath the window of the cell, knowing friends were dying and the continuous uncertainty of the sailors' own fate. He was given a medical discharge.

William Dart survived. He returned to sea on the Royal Oak but it does seem that for the first year he had short periods on a ship alternating with more time at a shore base. Perhaps this indicates that he, too, had problems readjusting. He completed his 12 years, however, leaving the Navy 'Time Expired' on the 30th August 1927. He is on the 1939 Register, shown as living on the Limpsfield Road, married to Violet Ashby and working as a Post Office engineer. He died in 1963.

William Hutchings also completed his service and became an AA patrolman when he left the service. He married in 1924 – in fact most of the survivors married within a couple of years of their return. Perhaps they were protecting themselves should another incident arise during the rest of their service, calling for 'single men only'.

Frederick Prout, the sick bay steward on whom so many in the party relied, is on the 1939 Register and is shown as having his own hair dressing business.

Joseph Marsh (the very fortunate survivor of malaria thanks to Prout and the Polish doctor) stayed in the Navy, is on the 1939 Register, the year in which he became a Petty Officer.

Lieutenant Bolitho rose to Commander and became a Captain of his own ship.

Commander Fraser wrote his own report in praise of the men, saying they all behaved splendidly, keeping up a good defiant spirit.

In the Second War he became the Commander of the Home Fleet, leading the force that destroyed the *Scharnhorst* at the Battle of the North Cape and at this point experienced an extreme irony. Russia awarded him the Order of Suvorov, First Degree, on the 25th February 1944.

He became Admiral of the Fleet and the first Baron Fraser GCB, KBE. All the naval party had thought him to be 'a good chap', who took many risks on their behalf.

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Three months after the sailors returned the Government and the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic signed a Trade Agreement and also agreed to not take hostile acts against each other and to desist from using official propaganda against each other. If they had decided to stop being stupid earlier two lives would have been saved and many others would not have been spoilt.

There is one more important comment. In Max Arthur's book *Lost Voices of the Royal Navy* there is an account of the Baku incident by Stan Smith (William Stanley Smith), also one of the crew. The first impression of the book was in 1996. William Smith must have been in his 90s and possibly suffering from false memories or was actually living a fantasy. It touches the truth in places but not often. It is also dreadfully lurid. An example is that he writes that Joseph Marsh committed suicide and his body was just left in the cell. The whole incident, either knowingly untrue or, most likely, totally imagined, is described in an extremely unpleasant manner. There are other examples but that one could have been easily checked with the other documents there are concerning Marsh. How are these memories collected and are they checked? It throws doubt on other books of this type.

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