



RICHARD SCOTT & THE Q-SHIPS

In concentrating on ensuring that Germany did not gain the advantage in the building of battleships Britain ignored other areas such as submarines, mines and increasing her fleet of destroyers, which resulted in her facing in 1915 the seemingly uncontrollable menace of the U-boats. As more nations declared war on her Germany started to sink mercantile shipping indiscriminately not only threatening Britain's supplies but also, controversially, ignoring the Seamen's unwritten law that the sea is the common enemy and, friend or foe, survivors from a sinking ship are always rescued.

At the time Britain was ill-prepared to deal with the problem but then had one of those ideas which is a 'dastardly deed' if an enemy does it but 'a jolly good wheeze' if your own side does – in other words she resorted to subterfuge and so the mystery ships or Q-ships were born.

A secret unit was formed within the Navy and the search began for men with the right calibre, described as having the combined skills of deep sea fishermen and big game hunters and who were disciplined, had great endurance and were prepared to take calculated risks. Uniquely the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy worked together. The former were disguised as mariners and supplied the experience of warfare, provided expert gunnery and were in control of attack. The latter advised them how to dress and how to act not only at sea but on shore. The fact that serving sailors wore 'civvies' to hide their true status resulted in them receiving white feathers so eventually they were issued with 'On war service' badges. All the men were volunteers.

A wide range of ships were utilised – Royal Navy sloops, fishing smacks and trawlers, mercantile drifters, coasters and colliers. They were then 'disguised'. Derricks were added, or another funnel; they were repainted, renamed, etc. and given light armaments, carefully concealed but which could be quickly exposed when needed. However, it was found that the best ship to use was the tramp steamer. Every shipping company had them, They were so ubiquitous that they were unnoticed and their innocence was taken for granted but with some skilled work they could easily be adapted to Q-ships. Once a ship had an encounter with a submarine it was again repainted and renamed.

Once ready, the Q-ships offered themselves as 'live bait', proceeding as if they were merchantmen but seeking out the submarines, coaxing them to rise. If a torpedo was fired the crew 'panicked', lowering boats, some men leaving the ship. Others remained, still and hidden, waiting for the submarine to come within range of their weapons when

they would then hoist the white ensign (required by international law) and attack. Another method was to pretend to not understand orders, all the time manoeuvring closer to the U-boat. It was tense and a question of timing and if the captain misjudged it, it could be fatal because the practice the Germans had adopted was to first threaten merchant shipping with a warning torpedo and then rise to kill the crew or simply sink the ship and not pick up survivors.

Richard Scott, born in Blindley Heath in 1876, had volunteered and been selected. The 1911 census shows him living with his wife and two small daughters at 6 Plaistow Street Lingfield. He was posted to the HMS Begonia and was serving on her when she was lost with all hands on the 6th October 1917. She was commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Basil S. Noake and was built as a minesweeping sloop, but on being repaired after being holed it was decided she would make an ideal Q-ship so her stern was changed and derricks added. It is not known for certain how she met her end. There was a report that she had 'collided' with a submarine. Q-boats did go to the aid of ships being attacked to draw the submarine away and if all else failed tried to ram it – a very difficult thing to do successfully. That may explain the report. It was entered in the log simply that she had failed to return.

There are several occasions when connections occur between our serving village men, and this is an example. One of the most successful commanding officers of the Q-ships was Admiral Bayly, sent by Winston Churchill (who it is said had the idea of the 'mystery ships') to take command of the Western Approaches from his base at Queenstown. As will be seen in the Fact Sheet *Frederick Gaunt and the Sinking of the Formidable* it was Churchill who was responsible for the miscarriage of justice suffered by Bayly after the Formidable was torpedoed. Richard Scott is thus linked to Frederick Gaunt. In the Fact Sheet *Alfred Mahon and HMS Bulwark*, it will be seen that the Formidable was anchored close to the Bulwark and took part in the search for survivors. Possibly Frederick Gaunt and Alfred Mahon knew each other.

Returning to Admiral Bayly, there is no explanation of Churchill's change of mind but possibly he realised from the reaction in other quarters that he had made a mistake. It would be interesting to know something of the relationship between the two men. Bayly became one of the most successful Q-boat commanders, earning himself fulsome praise from the Admiralty and admiration from the Americans, who sent a contingent to Queenstown to observe the effectiveness of deception. One comment made by the American commanding officer may have raised a few eyebrows and brought on a grinding of the teeth at the Admiralty – i.e. that Admiral Bayly was not only a strong, fair minded and popular leader but also a brave man, fearless when confronting the enemy – "whether that enemy was the foe or the Sea Lords."

The success of the Q-ships gradually increased to about the middle of 1917 but as they lost the element of surprise so their effectiveness diminished. Assessments of their overall success vary. Some historians argue, logically, that they caused greater difficulties because the Germans increased the ferocity of torpedoing ships rather than rising to intercept them. However, they were introduced at a desperate time when we had no defence against the U-boats. They created confusion, the U-boat commanders became wary and hesitant and the attacks on merchant vessels fell. The smack type Q-ship helped

to protect the fishing fleets from attack. Although the U-boats actually sunk by the Q-boats were perhaps less than 20 many were damaged and it gave Britain time to develop more effective measures. The mine barrages in the Heligoland Bight, the Straits of Dover and North Sea eventually made life difficult for submarines

Little is known now about the 'mystery ships' partly because during the war they were of necessity secret and it was not until several years after the war that they were openly referred to. Serving on them called for ingenuity, a great deal of patience, self-control and courage. The men also had to remember they were playing a part and keep up the pretence at sea in case they were being observed through a periscope and on land in case of spies. It is right the part they played is acknowledged at this time of commemoration.

M. Priestley. ©.2014.

Sources:

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