

## **WHY BRITAIN WASN'T STARVED INTO SURRENDER IN WORLD WAR ONE**

THAT GREAT BRITAIN WASN'T STARVED INTO SUBMISSION IN WORLD WAR 1 WAS THANKS TO THE GRITTY & SPIRITED DETERMINATION AND INDOMITABLE COURAGE OF THE MEN OF THE MERCANTILE MARINE & THE FISHING FLEETS – A STORY SELDOM TOLD.

In this, the final centenary year of the First World War I want to focus on the more often forgotten than remembered men of the Mercantile Marine - as it was then known - and the Fishing Fleets whose steadfastness, stoicism and indomitable courage ensured that we were able to fight on and win, and in particular, that we did not starve.

To fight and survive the country still needed to import raw materials such as ores, cotton, jute, oil and rubber and export manufactured goods and coal in order to earn its living.

In addition, it now needed to bring in military hardware, munitions, timber for trenches, horses and men to fight. The military supply chain alone across the English Channel to France required transporting some 40,000 tons a day to sustain our troops on the Western Front. The other theatres of war - Salonica, the Dardanelles and Palestine had also to be supplied.

And then there was the food. In 1914 Great Britain relied heavily on imported food stuffs: 80% of our wheat, 64% of our butter, 40%

of our meat and virtually all our raw sugar came by sea from North America, Canada, Australia, Java, the West Indies and South America among other countries. It was estimated that 64% of our daily calorie intake came by sea.

During 1915 shipping was being lost at an average rate of 38 ships and 73,000 tons per month to surface raiders, mines and submarines. And at this stage Germany only had thirty-seven submarines.

In May 1915 the actual losses were 51 ships totalling 89,000 tons including the infamous sinking of the Cunard liner Lusitania with the loss of 1,198 lives including 128 US citizens.

### **Picture of the LUSITANIA sinking**



Following diplomatic protests from the United States the Germans ended this first period of unrestricted submarine warfare.

Despite the number of ships sunk, through building replacements and captured ships the tonnage in mid-1915, was nearly what it had been in August 1914.

But that was only part of the picture. By the end of 1915 the shortage of shipping serving the civilian market had developed into Britain's most serious challenge to the nation's ability to feed itself. The pool of merchant ships free to carry commercial cargoes shrank swiftly due to enemy losses and military requisitioning. The latter grew from 3 million tons in January 1915 to just over 6 million tons by December; that was nearly 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the British merchant fleet.

But it was the decision by the Germans on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1917 to resume unrestricted submarine warfare that created true crisis conditions. The number of submarines available for active duty was now 105, and by June had risen to 129.

The losses were staggering: 135 British merchant ships amounting to 317,000 tons with the loss of 425 lives were sunk in February; 170 ships totalling 357,000 tons at the cost of 702 lives were lost in March. One of those vessel was the Liner FALABA with a crew of 94 bound for West Africa from the Mersey with 147 passengers and general cargo. Unable to outrun U-28 Captain Davis stopped and abandoned ship as ordered by the submarine. U-28 then fired a torpedo without warning killing 57 passengers and 47 crew.

210 ships totalling over 551,000 tons were lost in April with 1,139 lives. Estimates of a vessel's chances of surviving a round trip between the United Kingdom and a destination beyond Gibraltar were, for this period, about one in four.

But Figures don't convey the grim reality for the seafarers.

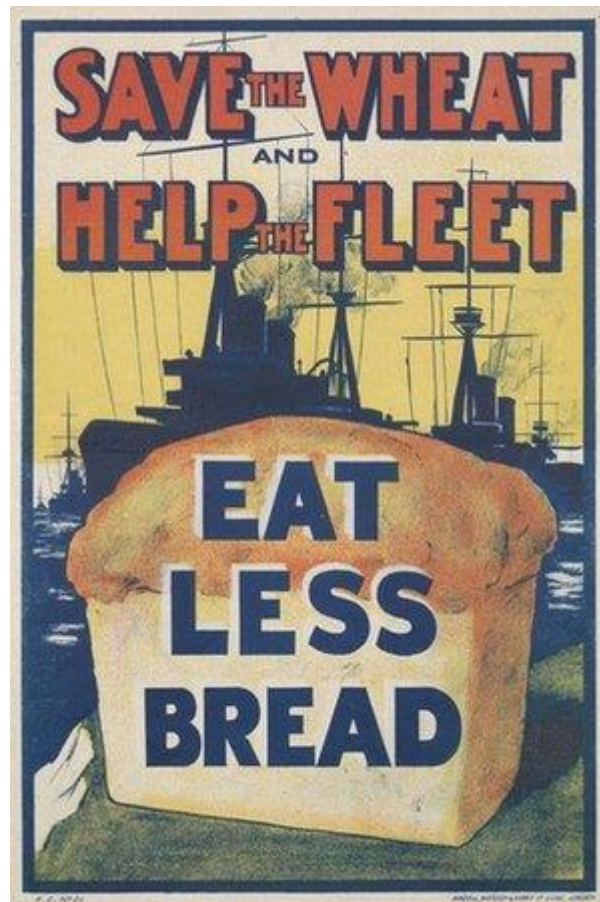
On Monday 19<sup>th</sup> March the ALNWICK CASTLE was torpedoed 320 miles from the Scilly Isles. She was a 5,900 ton passenger and general cargo ship with 139 people onboard including 25 rescued from the TREVOSE, torpedoed the previous day. The ship's six lifeboats were launched as she sank by the head. The surfaced submarine U-81 made off after another steamer. Captain Chave reported that they made sail before a freshening westerly wind and after dark he saw no more of the other boats. On Tuesday they fought the waves struggling with oars to keep her head to sea in the bitter wind while being constantly soaked. Water was served out twice a day – each ration about equal to one-third of a condensed milk tin.

The men were constantly bailing and by Thursday several of them were getting light headed. Some became delirious having been unable to resist drinking sea water. It wasn't until Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> that they were rescued. Of the original six boats two were never seen again, one was found with 27 still alive and another with 20 living and five dead. Out of a total of 139, 40 had lost their lives.

On 8<sup>th</sup> April the TORRINGTON, a 5,500 ton steamer under the command of Captain Anthony Starkey, homeward bound to Barry was torpedoed 150 miles off the Scilly Isles. Sinking and under fire from U-55 the Captain ordered his crew to take to their two lifeboats. U-55 fired on the Chief Officer's boat destroying it and its men. Captain Starkey and his crew of 16 were taken onboard the submarine. He was taken below and interrogated while his crew remained on deck. The submarine submerged for about 20 minutes and then surfaced to pick up the German boarding party sent to loot supplies from the TORRINGTON. Captain Starkey assumed that his men had been put back in their lifeboat. In fact they had been deliberately washed off the casing when U-55 dived

– he was informed of this later by the submarine’s radio officer. Captain Starkey was taken back to Germany as a Prisoner of War.

Two days later a similar fate befell the TORO, sunk by U-55 with 14 of her crew washed off the submarine’s casing when she dived.



In the Spring of 1917 the House of Commons was informed that there was only 4 to 6 weeks supply of food in the country. If the situation didn’t improve the utmost limit of endurance would be reached on 1 November and the War Cabinet would have to open negotiations with Germany.

The German U-boat offensive had simply thrown into perilously sharp relief a shipping crunch that had been building since at least 1916.

Theoretically, the Allies possessed more than enough shipping for their war needs. In 1914, an overwhelming percentage of the world's merchant fleet was in Allied hands. Out of a world steamship fleet of 45 million gross registered tons, about 19 million tons were British flagged.

But it wasn't just as straightforward as the numbers of hulls and their capacity or the increasing competition for cargo space from the military authorities.

Distance, was a still greater complicating factor. For example, in peacetime two-thirds of Britain's sugar supply had come from Europe. Forced to resort to alternative sources, we expanded our purchases around the world buying sugar in Java, Cuba, Mauritius, Peru, the West Indies, and North America. This global sourcing in lieu of previously near-at-hand supplies affected other commodities too. As a result ocean voyages doubled or tripled in length.

Other factors came into play. In peacetime, shipments of coal outwards from Britain to South America had been balanced against large meat and grain imports to Britain from the River Plate region. Sustaining those meat supplies in wartime rendered the South American routes vital, especially since they cut, by half, the transport time from Australia and New Zealand.

Consequently, coal bunkers for grain and meat-carrying steamers had to be maintained and in addition, large coal shipments to Argentina were necessary to keep their freight trains running and to fuel scaled-up meat packing plants and cold-storage installations.

The Allies had been able to build their way out of the shipping shortage but as the war continued Britain's shipyards, deprived of labour because of the needs of the army, and steel for other uses, and preoccupied with Admiralty orders for warships, couldn't keep up with the mounting losses.

Yet for the better part of the First World War the Admiralty, with the support of the shipping companies, had resisted the introduction of convoying, the traditional way of protecting merchant ships in war in the days of sail. And for a number of reasons. Steamships were faster, independent of winds and could avoid the most dangerous sea lanes. Convoys would waste time to assemble. The use of the wireless to do so would alert the enemy. Merchant ships could not keep station in fixed columns and large formations would make it difficult to zigzag - the best diversionary action against submarines. Slow ships would impede faster ones. The destination ports' handling capacity would be overwhelmed by cargoes arriving together. There were not enough naval escort ships to go around.

All but the last of these arguments proved without foundation.

But the rate of attrition could not be sustained and the policy was changed.

On 24 May 1917 – the first transatlantic convoy sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia. Thereafter the loss figures showed a steady decline.

Even so the voluntary restraint on food consumption and the encouragement of new diets wasn't enough to overcome shortages and so rationing was introduced in January 1918.



By April rationing included:

5oz per week of butter and margarine

4 oz of jam

2 oz of tea

8 oz of bacon

That the calorie intake at the end of the war was almost at pre-war levels despite the loss of merchant ships from enemy action and the competition for carrying capacity from the imports of weapons, munitions and men to enable us to fight was down to the stoicism and heroism of the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets.

Assessing the reasons for the Allied victory in the First World War Lloyd George picked out civilian food supply as the ultimate deciding factor.

Michael Miller an historian of the First World War has observed that:



“ Our classic portrait of the First World War is one of stalemate and mass casualties on the Western Front. Yet the war was won as much on sea as on land through the Allied nations’ ability to mobilize the world’s resources and, just as importantly, through their ability to ship those resources across thousands of sea miles to points of production and consumption in their home countries”.

And it was at the cost of the lives of over 17,000 Merchant Seamen and Fishermen. Two further examples of how those losses came about and what it meant for the crews are from the sinkings of the TERENCE and the MARISTON.

On 28 April 1917 the 4,300 ton steamer TERENCE was 200 miles off the Irish coast bound for Liverpool when at 1320 a submarine was spotted approaching on the port bow. The helm was put over to bring the submarine astern. Seventeen rounds were fired from the ship’s 12-pounder gun. The submarine disappeared in the haze. At 1655 the wake of a torpedo was seen approaching from the starboard quarter, which TERENCE avoided. There followed an inconclusive gun battle until about 1900 by which time the ship had expended 74 shells. Then another submarine surfaced and joined in the shelling until about 2000 when it ceased due to darkness. But at 2305 a torpedo struck. The crew took to the lifeboats and spent the next 61 hours in the bitter cold of the North Atlantic. Captain Fordsham and his crew showed great courage and tenacity throughout their ensuing 3 day ordeal before they were rescued.

The MARISTON, a 2,900 ton ship inbound to Glasgow with a cargo of copper was torpedoed 80 miles west of Fastnet and

destroyed. Eighteen of the crew were thrown into the sea by the explosion and ten died in it. The cook, Charles Williams who managed to climb onto a floating hatch, watched in horror as one by one his shipmates were pulled off the wreckage by a school of sharks in a feeding frenzy. The attacking submarine U-45 surfaced but did not intervene. Williams was the only survivor out of a crew of 29. He returned to sea but lost his life in August 2018 when his next ship, the PALMELLA, was torpedoed in the Irish Sea.

Eloquent testimonies to the endurance and sacrifice of the men of the Mercantile Marine and the Fishing Fleets in WW1, and why the Red Ensign has flown from the Cenotaph since 1919. Lest we forget.

Their efforts were further recognized by King George V when he said that the Mercantile Marine should henceforth be known as the Merchant Navy, the Fourth Service, and why Our Monarch is “Master of the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets”.

Founded in 1839, during WWI our Society assisted some 51,000 sailors: Merchant Navy and Fishermen by providing clothing, food, accommodation and rail warrants for them to get back home. It also provided financial assistance to the widows, orphans and aged parents for whom the loss of the only breadwinner was devastating.

And after 179 years we continue to support Merchant Mariners and Fishermen who face financial difficulties.

For further information about the history and work of the Society visit [shipwreckedmariners.org.uk](http://shipwreckedmariners.org.uk)

References:

[https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/sea\\_transport\\_and\\_supply](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/sea_transport_and_supply)

Michael Miller WW1 – Sea Transport & Supply

British Food Policy During the First World War

Spartacus Website

Merchant Seafaring Through WW1 by Peter Lyon

War Under THE RED ENSIGN 1914-1918 by Bernard Edwards