

AN UNFORTUNATE INCIDENT

Collisions at sea between large or small vessels in open or enclosed waters, is an experience which seaman would prefer to avoid. The sinking by gunfire of an Allied ship going about its lawful business on the high seas in war, perhaps might be described as unfortunate. The crew of H.M.S. Mantua and the French sailing ship Quillota might have described it differently.

The Mantua was built in 1909 for the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company of Greenock by Caird and Company of Greenock. Launched in February 1909 and completed in April as a Passenger/Cargo Refrigerated Steel Screw Steamer with two masts. Her technical details were as follows:-

Length ~ 540-ft; Breadth ~ 61ft-4ins; Draft ~ 24ft-6ins;

Displacement ~ 10,885-tons;

Propulsion ~ 2 x 4-Cylinder Reciprocating Steam Engines; 13,000 IHP; 17.5-knots;

She began her sea going career with a maiden voyage to Australia on the 2nd June, 1909 and continued to sail the oceans of the world as a commercial passenger/cargo ship until the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914.

On the 5th August she was requisitioned by the Admiralty for service with the Royal Navy as an Armed Merchant Cruiser. Converted at Liverpool she was fitted with 8 x 4.7-inch guns, 2 x 6-pounders and commissioned as H.M.S. Mantua on the 15th August, 1914.

Initially she was attached to the Northern Patrol undertaking coastal patrolling and escort duties. During 1915 she was employed as a troopship.

In 1917 H.M.S. Mantua was stationed at Plymouth for duties as a coastal patrol and escort vessel between the United Kingdom and South Africa. During one of these patrols H.M.S. Mantua was involved in a serious maritime incident with the Quillota a French three-masted steel sailing ship.

The Quillota was built in 1902 by Ateliers & Chantiers of St Nazaire for the Society des voiliers of St Nazaire. Her technical details were as follows:-

Length ~ 284.5-ft; Breadth ~ 44-ft; Draft ~ 24-ft;

Displacement ~ 2,848-tons;

Rigging ~ 3-masts; 2,500 Square of Metres of Sail;

Armament ~ 2 x cannons;

On the 24th September, 1917 the Quillota had sailed from St Nazaire for a voyage to the Australian port of Freemantle under the command of Captain Mal. By the 6th October she was sailing along off the coast of Portugal in poor weather conditions. A lookout brought to the attention of the officer of the deck that he had sighted a large fast-moving steam ship which

was apparently heading directly towards them. Captain Mal was called up from below to the main deck and made aware of the presence of this unidentified and camouflaged painted vessel approximately 12-15 miles distant. Visibility was poor which hindered the captain's view through his telescope although he noticed a small flag flying from her mast. Tense and suspicious he considered that it was probably an enemy ship as the unidentified vessel had not signalled the Quillota. Whilst the captain was deciding on his best option the first officer shouted that the mystery ship had opened fire but then quickly changed his mind as perhaps it could have been a discharge of steam or smoke. Captain Mal had convinced himself that the vessel which was closing rapidly upon the Quillota was probably a German surface raider and ordered his crew to their battle stations. Whilst they were doing so a shell fired from the suspected enemy ship passed through the Quillota's main sail. Captain Mal immediately ordered his gunners to open fire. The pitching and rolling in the heavy sea caused the shells from the Quillota to fall short of the target.

The Quillota's quarter-master suggested to the Captain that perhaps the unidentified ship was firing blanks and waiting for an identification signal from the sailing ship. Captain Mal ordered his gunners to cease fire and had the French tricolour hauled up the main mast. He also asked his telegraphic operator if he had received any signals. The operator replied that no signals had been received and was then told by Captain Mal to send out an SOS giving their position, course and asking for help. The telegraphic operator also tried to contact the unknown ship without success.

Captain Mal ordered his gunners to open fire again. During the exchange of fire between the two ships the Quillota sustained damage to her hull, rigging and the bow section of the sailing ship was burning fiercely. To save his crew Captain Mal gave orders to abandon the Quillota. They clambered into the starboard lifeboat which twisted and turned against the sailing ship's hull in the rough sea. Sadly one man slipped and was crushed between the lifeboat and hull of the sailing ship and drowned. As the lifeboat pulled away from the burning sailing ship they watched her slowly sink into the cold seas of the Bay of Biscay.

The unidentified ship cautiously approached the lifeboat and stopped to rescue Captain Mal and twenty-eight of his crew. To the astonishment of the Frenchmen they discovered that their rescuer was an Armed British Merchant Cruiser – H.M.S. Mantua. Both ships had mistakenly believed each other to be the enemy.

Captain Arthur Dawson who had assumed command of H.M.S. Mantua on the 1st March, 1917 thought that the hoisting of the French tricolour was a ruse by an enemy raider to lure him into a false sense of security. He expressed his deep regret to Captain Mal about the

whole incident and the sinking of his sailing ship. The shells fired by the Quillota had damaged the upper structures of H.M.S. Mantua and caused six casualties amongst her crew. She had sailed from Plymouth on the 1st October, 1917 for a routine patrol to Dakar. An extract from her log records:-

6th October, 1917.

0820 hours ~ Sighted sailing ship on port bow.

1014 hours ~ Fired one shell across her bows.

1010 hours ~ Sailing vessel replied by sending two shells which fell short.

1012 hours ~ General Quarters. Full Speed. Commenced to sink sailing vessel.

1145 hours ~ Ceased firing.

Noon ~ Vessel steaming to spot where ship sank for survivors.

1225 hours ~ Sighted boat full of men on starboard bow.

1245 hours ~ Stopped and picked up survivors.

1255 hours ~ Revs 70 and vessel put on her course.

On the 11th October, H.M.S. Mantua arrived at Dakar where the 29 survivors from the Quillota were taken ashore. The sinking of an Allied ship by H.M.S. Mantua was signalled to the Admiralty by Captain Dawson. The incident had the ingredients for a serious diplomatic fall-out between the British and French governments. However, the British acted quickly to smooth over any difficulties which might have arisen.

Cabinet papers for the 8th October 1917 concerning the sailing ship Quillota noted that “The First Sea Lord reported that H.M.S. Mantua had sunk an armed French sailing ship by gunfire in the Bay of Biscay, mistaking her for a German raider. One Frenchman had been killed on the sailing ship and six of the crew of H.M.S. Mantua had been wounded. Suitable apologies had been tendered to the French government and the Admiral at Sierra Leone had been ordered to Dakar to confer with the French Naval Commander with a view to investigating matters with the French”.

A court of enquiry was conducted by the Admiralty and the French naval authorities at Dakar. The findings of the court acknowledged that both captains had made mistakes, but it was probable that those of the Quillota were less than that of H.M.S. Mantua. On the 5th December, 1917 the Foreign Office submitted a formal and official apology to the French Foreign Affairs Ministry over the sinking of the French sailing ship Quillota.

H.M.S. Mantua continued her war-time duties and during 1918 patrolled the seaways between Cape Town and Sierra Leone where she was stationed. After the Armistice she was decommissioned and in 1920 and was returned to her owners. The Mantua resumed a

commercial service sailing between the United Kingdom and Australia. In 1935 she was sold for £32,000 and broken up for scrap at Shanghai.

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[Sources: Naval History Web-Site ~ www.naval-history.net

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SV Quillota Web-Site ~ www.wrecksite.eu

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Find My Past Web-Site ~ www.findmypast.co.uk]

Personal References & Notes]

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