

A NEW YEARS DAY TRAGEDY

by Roger G Coleman

During the morning of the 6th January, 1915 the townspeople of Lyme Regis, were preparing to pay their mournful respects to six dead sailors from H.M.S. Formidable. From public and private buildings flags were at half-mast and shops were closed. From early morning wreaths and floral tributes began to arrive at the Assembly Hall where the deceased sailors were lying in their coffins. It was there, that the relatives were able to view their loved ones for the last time. The names of the deceased men were:

Petty Officer W. Feldon RN Aged 36
Stoker W. C. Eley RN Aged 24
Stoker H. Bernthall RN Aged 19
Stoker W. Fawkes RN Aged 31
Stoker H. Souter RNR Aged 27
Boy 1st Class B.A. de P. Smyth RN Aged 17

By mid-day people began to assemble and by the time of the funeral their numbers had grown to several thousand. At 1pm a firing party of thirty men from the Devonport Gunnery School, together with twenty naval personnel who were to draw a gun carriage arrived at Lyme Regis. The funeral service at St Michael's Church was timed to begin at 2pm. When mourners began to arrive at the church the bells rang out a muffled peal. The pathway into the church was flanked on either side by scouts from the Lyme Regis Troop who stood to attention as the relatives of the deceased sailors arrived. As the muffled peal of bells faded away, a single church bell rang out signalling that the funeral procession, was leaving the Assembly Hall.

The six coffins, each covered with the Union Jack were preceded by the Firing Party with arms reversed. On the gun carriage was a single coffin containing the body of Petty Officer Feldon, the other five coffins were borne by local townsmen. A Boy Scout followed carrying the Union Jack and behind him walked 48 survivors from H.M.S. Formidable, who had landed at Lyme Regis, each carrying a single wreath. Behind them was a detachment of the 11th Battalion, Devon Regiment, the Mayor and Mayoress of Lyme Regis, Mace-Bearers with maces draped in black crepe and Corporation Officials. A number of Belgian refugees, who were housed in the town, followed the procession one carrying the Belgian Flag and another, the French Tricolour.



At the church gates the funeral cortege was met by the Bishop of Salisbury, the vicar and other members of the clergy from local churches. The Bishop conducted a sombre funeral service which concluded with the organist playing Chopin's Funeral March. Outside the church the cortege and funeral procession reformed and proceeded up the hill towards Lyme Regis Cemetery. At the cemetery the coffins were laid side-by-side in one grave. After a hymn was sung the Bishop of Salisbury gave the Benediction, the Last Post was sounded and the firing party fired the last salute to the deceased men.

H.M.S. Formidable was one of three "1898" Class battleships and was laid down at Portsmouth in March 1898, completed in 1901, but due to technical difficulties was not commissioned until October 1904. She was 430-ft in length overall, with a beam of 75-ft, maximum draught 29-ft and displaced 15,000-tons. 20 Belleville coal-fired boilers produced steam for her ancillary equipment and the 2 x 3-cylinder Triple Expansion Engines which drove two propellers shafts at a maximum speed of 18-knots. The armament consisted of 4 x 12-inch guns, 12 x 6-inch guns, 16 x 12-pounders, 2 x 12-pounder guns, 6 x 3-pounder guns, two machine guns and 4 x 18-inch submerging torpedoes. She was fitted with Harvey and Krupp armour plates amidships and at other vulnerable areas including bulkheads, the side plating forward and aft, turrets, casemates, barbettes, conning tower, main deck, middle deck and lower deck. The total weight of armour fitted amounted to approximately 4,300-tons. Her complement was nominally 780 officers and men and building costs were £1,000,000.



After commissioning H.M.S. Formidable joined the Mediterranean Fleet and in 1908 was transferred to the Channel Fleet, paid off and underwent a refit at Chatham. Re-commissioned in 1909 she joined the Home Fleet and was attached to the Atlantic Fleet until the Spring of 1912. On completion of another refit she was based at Sheerness with a reduced crew until the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 and assigned to the Channel Fleet's 5th Battle Squadron. The Channel Fleet commanded by Vice-Admiral Sir Cecil Burney was made up of pre-dreadnought battleships and light cruisers forming the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th Battle Squadrons. The ships in the 5th Battle Squadron were H.M.S. Prince of Wales (Flagship), H.M.S. Bulwark (destroyed by an internal explosion in November 1914), H.M.S. London, H.M.S. Venerable, H.M.S. Queen, H.M.S. Formidable, H.M.S. Irresistible, H.M.S. Implacable, and the light cruisers H.M.S. Topaz and H.M.S. Diamond. Later H.M.S. Lord Nelson, Flagship of the Channel Fleet and H.M.S. Agamemnon were included in the squadron.

During the first few weeks after the outbreak of war the 5th Battle Squadron was employed patrolling the English Channel to protect the Straits of Dover to ensure the safe passage of troops and supplies to France and Flanders. In early September the squadron was sent to Portland for gunnery practice and returned to Sheerness amid fears of a German invasion of the east coast. On the 17th December Vice-Admiral Sir Lewis Bayley assumed command of the Channel Fleet and was of the opinion that the 5th Battle Squadron required further sea exercises and battle practice at Portland. His concerns were supported by the Admiralty and he was given permission for the squadron to sail from Sheerness to Portland.

The squadron sailed from Sheerness during the morning of the 30th December, and were escorted by six destroyers from Harwich to ensure their safe passage through the Straits of Dover. As the Squadron passed Folkestone during the afternoon the escort destroyers departed leaving the two light cruisers to protect the battleships from submarine attack. Bayley, in his flagship H.M.S. Lord Nelson led his squadron in line-ahead formation steaming at 10-knots. H.M.S. Topaz and H.M.S. Diamond were stationed a mile astern of the last battleship, H.M.S. Formidable. Vice-Admiral Bayley had not ordered his squadron to zig-zag as the Admiralty had had no recent reports of German U-boat activity in the Channel. On the 28th December however, Kapitän-leutnant Rudolf Schneider, the commanding officer of U-24 had penetrated through the defences of the Straits of Dover and into the English Channel.

By first light on the 31st the 5th Battle Squadron was approximately 13 miles south of Portland Bill and with a severe gale expected the ships battened down for heavy seas. Bayley exercised his ships throughout the day steaming down towards Start Point and then turning on to a reciprocal course back towards St Alban's Head. During the hours of darkness the squadron was to carry out course changes as ordered by Bayley who intended to be off Portland Bill at dawn on the 1st January,

1915.

Earlier in the day Kapitän-leutnant Schneider had seen the 6th Battle Squadron which had been on exercises steaming away from Portland. Later he sighted three large warships steaming down channel and he decided to shadow them. Although a heavy sea was running visibility was good throughout the day and into the evening. Just after midnight on the 1st January, 1915 aided by a full moon Kapitän-leutnant Schneider was able to identify the three vessels he had been shadowing by their silhouettes as battleships. Manoeuvring U-24 towards the ships undetected, he selected his target and fired one torpedo at H.M.S. Queen but missed. He then saw five large warships which appeared to have become detached from the other three. At 2.20am he fired another torpedo at the last ship in the line, H.M.S. Formidable and struck her amidships on the starboard side under the forward funnel.

Captain Arthur Loxley was on the bridge of H.M.S. Formidable when the torpedo exploded beneath him in No.2 Boiler Room. Ordering all watertight doors to be shut and the crew to their collision stations he turned his ship which had begun to list into the wind and rising sea. Water poured into the ship, flooded the engine room, the steam pressure rapidly fell to zero and all electrical power was lost. The weather conditions were steadily deteriorating but amidst the chaos and darkness the crew remained calm and disciplined. Captain Loxley ordered the ships boats to be launched and men began to arrive on the weather deck, most of whom had been asleep when the torpedo exploded, were only wearing their night attire.

H.M.S. Formidable carried two 56-ft steam pinnace's, one 36-ft pinnace, one 36-ft sailing pinnace, one 40-ft sailing launch, two 34-ft cutters and one 30-ft cutter, three 27-ft whalers, one 28-ft gig, one 16-ft dinghy, and a 13-ft balsa raft. With a 20-degree list to starboard, only boats on that side could be launched. Despite the angle of the deck two boats full of men were lowered into the rough sea but one was overturned and the men drowned.

U-24 had remained close by her victim unseen and a few minutes after 3am her captain fired another torpedo at the Formidable which exploded in No.1 Boiler Room below the after funnel on the portside. The effect was to bring the Formidable on to an even keel. Captain Loxley ordered everyone up on to the main deck as there was no prospect of the saving the ship. With no steam power available the heavier boats could not be launched and some were too badly damaged. All available portable material which would float was thrown overboard to help keep men afloat in the water. A passing merchant ship was seen from the bridge of the Formidable and distress flares were fired to attract her attention but she continued on her course having not seen the flares or ignored them.



H.M.S. London had noticed the Formidable leave the line and signalled the flagship but gave no explanation. With the loss of electrical power H.M.S. Formidable was unable to use her wireless equipment. H.M.S. Topaz and Diamond closed towards the stricken ship to assist in rescuing men from the sea. Kapitän-leutnant Schnieder satisfied that the Formidable's fate was sealed turned U-24 away and headed out into the English Channel. The two cruisers were unable to take any offensive action as there were many men struggling in the water and they would have become victims of their own ships.

H.M.S. Topaz signalled the flagship that Formidable had been torpedoed by a submarine and Bayley followed Admiralty instructions on encountering submarines in such circumstances and ordered his ships to change course and then head towards Portland at full speed. HMS Topaz and Diamond were ordered to remain with Formidable and continue the rescue effort. Torpedo boats and small craft were ordered to sail from Devonport and Portland but the bad weather forced them to return.

As the Formidable began to settle in the rough sea those who remained on board knew that they would not be among the survivors. Those who jumped into the rough sea were never seen again. The bow dipped beneath the waves and she turned over on to her starboard side. At the last moment men were seen to slide down the ship's hull only to injure themselves on the bilge keel and then tumble into the sea. Just after 4.30am H.M.S. Formidable sank beneath the waves of the English Channel approximately 30 miles south of Lyme Regis. H.M.S. Topaz had rescued 43 men from a boat and H.M.S. Diamond 37 men from the water of whom were 14 officers. They were wearing a Gieves waistcoat - an early type of life jacket - rather than the Admiralty swimming collar issued to the men which was supposed to support them in the water. H.M.S. Topaz and Diamond remained in the area until first light. With no prospect of rescuing any more survivors both ships set a course towards Portland. It took them more than ten hours to reach the safety of the harbour due to gale force winds and heavy seas.

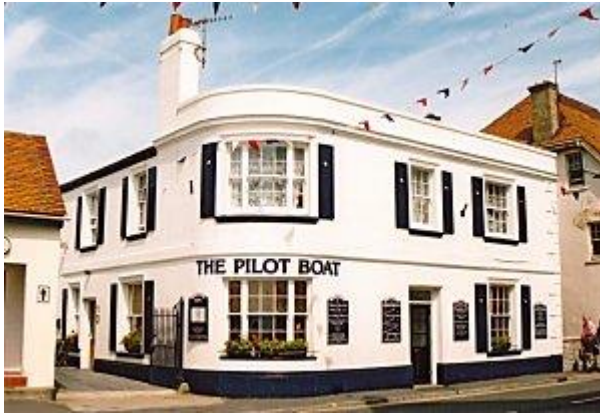
One damaged sailing launch from the Formidable, with 71 men aboard had drifted away from the scene of the disaster into the darkness. At approximately 9.30am the launch was 15 miles from Berry Head where it was seen by the 'Provident' a

Brixham sailing trawler, captained by William Pillar with crew of four. With great difficulty in 30-ft seas the men from the Formidable clambered on to trawler. As the last man was hauled aboard the launch broke up and sank. The 'Provident' after battling through the appalling weather reached Brixham at 7pm where the survivors were landed ashore. They were organised into three groups and respectively taken to a hotel, café and the Sailors Institute, given dry clean clothing, hot food and drinks.

A sailing pinnace which had been launched safely from H.M.S. Formidable and overloaded with 71 men had also drifted away into the stormy night. The boat was soon swamped with water which made it difficult for those who could to row. The rudder had been lost, there was no compass and the helmsman Leading Seaman Thomas Carroll steered as best he could with a single oar. There was no food or water aboard for the men who had to keep baling out sea water continuously with their boots. For 22 hours they were unable to make any landfall and had to endure the winter storm. Desperately they had tried and failed to attract the attention of passing ships. Fourteen men died and were lowered over the side to ease conditions in the open boat.

A few minutes before 11pm Police Sergeant Stockley who was on duty with another officer in the square at Lyme Regis were alerted by a group residents who had heard shouting which appeared to come from the seashore. The two policemen proceeded to the seafront and saw near the Cobb Gate a large open boat heading towards the shore. The sergeant sent his colleague to get more help and himself went down to the shoreline where he managed to grab a line hurled from the boat as it was being driven ashore by the waves.

Sergeant Stockley managed to hold on to the line as one sailor jumped from the pinnace into the water and scrambled ashore. Another followed, but weakened by exposure and exhaustion lost his grip on the line and was carried back into the sea. Stockley, seeing this rushed into the heavy surf, grabbed the sailor and with difficulty dragged him on to the beach. More residents from the town began to arrive at the Cobb including the local coxswain of the lifeboat to assist in the rescue effort. Two local doctors initially assessed the condition of the sailors on the beach before that were taken to various public houses in the town. The Landlord of the Pilot Boat Inn and his wife were awakened by the rescuers and they opened their doors for a group of exhausted sailors.



Scantily dressed they were desperately in need of warmth and had to be rubbed to simulate their circulation and then given hot drinks and brandy. Some were so cold that at first they were unable to swallow. The men were given dry clothing brought by residents and a blanket to wrap themselves in. After about two hours most of them had sufficiently recovered from their ordeal and were taken to the homes of willing residents to be looked after. Those who remained unconscious were taken by car, lent by the mayor to the Cottage Hospital where they made a full recovery.

All of the 48 survivors who arrived at Lyme Regis owed their lives to the skill of Leading Seaman Carroll who steered the pinnace and to Petty Officer Herbert Bing who cajoled, shouted and encouraged the men to sing and keep baling and rowing until they reached safety. Although blackout rules were in force at Lyme Regis it was fortunate that Leading Seaman Carroll had seen a light shining ashore long enough for him to get a bearing and steer the boat towards the beach. He kept the light to starboard and thus avoided a rocky outcrop. When all the survivors had been taken ashore six bodies were found lying in the bottom of the boat and taken to the Assembly Rooms. Three others did not respond to their treatment and died ashore.

Two of them were twins, John and Henri Villers Russell, both sick berth attendants. The bereaved parents claimed the bodies of the twins and took them to their home town of Crewe where they were buried in St. Michael's Churchyard, Coppenhall. The other deceased sailor Leading Seaman John Pells was also claimed by his parents and taken to Kings Lynn where he was buried in the local cemetery.

The six dead men found in the boat were those who were interred together in the one grave in Lyme Regis Cemetery. Briefly their details were as follows:-

Petty Officer William Feldon, born London in October 1878 and joined the Royal Navy aged 16 in May 1894; Stoker 1st Class Horace Frank Burnthall, born London in February 1893 and joined the Royal Navy in August 1912; (His surname is spelt on the gravestone as Bernthall; CWGC as Bernthal) Stoker 1st Class William Charles Eley, born Liverpool in February 1890

and joined the Royal Navy in March 1908;
Stoker 1st Class William Fawkes, born South Shields in July 1883 and
joined the Royal Navy in January 1903;
Stoker 1st Class Henry Souter, born Thornaby-on-Tees in August 1884 and
joined the Royal Naval Reserve in April 1912;
Boy 1st Class Bernard Arthur de Plumley Smyth, born London in
September 1897 and joined the Royal Navy aged 16 in March 1913;

An inquest was held on the nine deceased sailors on the 2nd January in the Assembly Rooms conducted by the Coroner for West Dorset Mr C.G. Nantes. He expressed his condolences and that of others at the loss of life of so many brave men. The identification of the dead was established and evidence was given by some of the survivors concerning the loss of H.M.S. Formidable and the perilous passage of the sailing pinnace to Lyme Regis. The jury returned a verdict that the deceased sailors had 'died from exposure at sea in an open boat following on from an accident having occurred to their ship'.

Out of a complement of 747 officers and men, 34 officers including Captain Loxley and 513 men were lost in the sinking of H.M.S. Formidable. The majority have no known grave and their names are inscribed on the Portsmouth, Plymouth and Chatham Naval Memorial, most of those lost are on the latter. Only 18 bodies were recovered for burial.

A body was washed up on the beach at Seatown, near Chideock on the 12th February, 1915. An inquest was held at the Anchor Inn, Seatown where it was thought probable that the body was that of a sailor from H.M.S. Formidable. The inquest jury returned a verdict 'that the body was found thrown upon the beach there by the sea, drowned but there was no means of identifying the body or evidence of how it became drowned'. The unidentified man was interred in St Giles' Churchyard, Chideock with full military honours. Subsequently a wooden cross was erected over the grave and a brass plate attached and inscribed:



JESU MERCY
In Memory Of An Unknown Man

Claimed By The Admiralty As From H.M.S. Formidable
Washed Ashore Feb. 12th 1915

A CWGC headstone was not erected to this unknown sailor 'Known Only To God' as all the names of those lost are commemorated on naval memorials.

The Reverend Arthur Loxley and his wife Alice of Northchurch, Buckinghamshire, lost three sons in the First World War. Captain Arthur Loxley on H.M.S. Formidable, Captain Vere Loxley, R.M.L.I., killed on the Somme on the 13th November, 1916 and Captain Reginald Loxley, Royal Air Force, killed on the 18th October, 1918.

The loss of a battleship and so many lives prompted the Admiralty to point the finger of blame at Vice-Admiral Bayley for risking his squadron in the presence of enemy U-boats. Bayley robustly refuted the accusations and he asked to be tried by Court Martial which was refused. He was relieved of his command on the 17th January and appointed President of the Royal Naval College at Greenwich. A few months later he resumed an active command as Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches at Queenstown, Ireland where he served for the rest of the war. In 1919 he again wrote to the Admiralty about the loss of H.M.S. Formidable and included written testaments and documents in his submission. The Admiralty demurred to investigate the loss of the battleship and in their reply to Bayley offered their approbation for the work he had carried out Queenstown as Commander-in-Chief.

Kapitän-leutenant Rudolf Schneider became a very successful U-boat commander during the First World War sinking 140,783-tons of shipping. On the 13th October, 1917 whilst in command of U-87 he was washed overboard during a storm in the North Sea. He was rescued and brought back aboard the submarine, but died shortly after and was buried at sea.

King George V presented Captain Pillar of the sailing trawler 'Provident' and three of his crew with the Sea Gallantry Medal. They also received the Shipwrecked Mariners Benevolent Society's gold medal and awarded a gratuity. A young nephew of Captain Pillar was also on board the Provident, but as he was not officially a crew member he did not receive a medal. Police Sergeant James Stockley received the Board of Trade Silver Medal for Gallantry in Saving Life at Sea and the Bronze Medal of the Royal Humane Society.

Within a few days most of the 48 survivors who had landed at Lyme Regis had sufficiently recovered to satisfy doctors that they were fit for duty and could return to their home ports. Before they left Leading Seaman Thomas Carroll presented the Mayor with a ship's crest of H.M.S. Formidable as a token of their appreciation to the townspeople for their kindness and hospitality. On the day of their departure the sailors marched to the railway station accompanied by the town band and

cheering residents. Before the men boarded the train the Mayor gave a short speech and on behalf of the people of Lyme Regis wished them all the very best for the future.

Lyme Regis Museum has on display artefacts from H.M.S. Formidable and memorabilia. Photographs and information can also be viewed in the Pilot Boat Inn. H.M.S. Formidable now lies upside down in 60-metres of water and is controlled wreck site under the Protection of Military Remains Act of 1986.

A Tale Of Two Dogs ~ Bruce & Lassie

The naval career of Captain Arthur Loxley had steadily progressed since joining the Royal Navy as a cadet in July 1888. He had assumed command of H.M.S. Formidable on the 2nd September 1914 and often took with him his dog, 'Bruce' an Airedale terrier. When the Formidable was torpedoed the dog was by his master's side on the bridge of the ship. Both Captain Loxley and Bruce drowned when the ship sank. Captain Loxley's body was not recovered but Bruce was washed ashore below Abbotsbury Castle and was buried in the pet's cemetery in Abbotsbury Gardens.



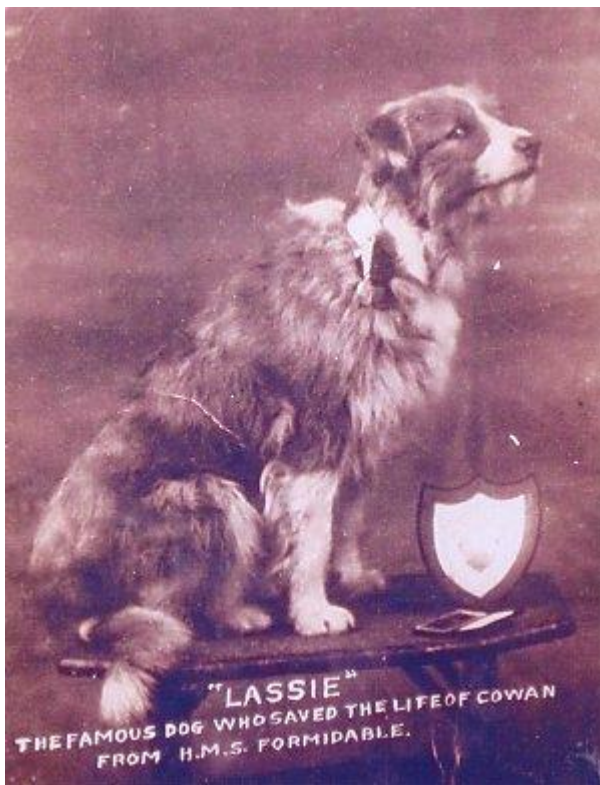
A headstone was erected and inscribed as follows:-

BRUCE
Airedale Terrier
Who Stood Till The End
With
Captain Loxley R.N.
On The Bridge Of
H.M.S. Formidable

When Sunk By A Torpedo
30 Miles From Portland
Jan 1st 1915
+++
Bruce's Body Was Washed Up
Below Abbotsbury Castle

Lassie

When the pinnace from H.M.S. Formidable beached at Lyme Regis the sailor who Police Sergeant Stockley bravely rescued from the sea was Able Seaman John Cowan. He was carried to the Pilot Boat Inn meagrely dressed, cold, and unconscious. The seaman did not respond to resuscitation and appeared to be dead. Taken to the cellar which was being used as a temporary mortuary he was laid on the floor. The Landlord of the public house had a cross-bred collie dog called Lassie who it was later alleged had been trained to bark if the landlord's wife collapsed as she was an epileptic.



Inquisitively Lassie wandered over to where John Cowan was lying and began to lick the man's face and hands. After about thirty minutes someone noticed Lassie's activities and then heard a faint murmur from the seaman. On closer inspection Cowan was seen to be breathing and medical aid was quickly applied before he was taken to the Cottage Hospital. There, he subsequently made a full recovery

with Lassie remaining with him during his convalescence. Reports on the loss of H.M.S. Formidable appeared in local and national newspapers. The human story about Lassie and John Cowan had great appeal to the readership in this country and abroad. An extract from an article in The Daily Chronicle of the 5th January stated: "Immediately willing hands completed the work the dog had begun and in a short time Cowan sat up. Since then the dog and Cowan have been inseparable and as Cowan is not yet allowed out, he and the dog spend most of the time before the kitchen fire cultivating the acquaintance so curiously begun." Lassie was awarded two medals and was placed first in a canine section at Crufts Dog Show in the Spring of 1915. It has been claimed that when the story of Lassie became known in America it inspired film writers to create a series of 'Lassie' the dog movies.