

*The following is an account of the Battle of Lerwick, in which Edward Brooke received serious injuries and lost his ship, the H.M.S. "Strongbow", with heavy loss of life.*

## **The Battle of Lerwick**

[Lerwick is the capital and main port of the Shetland Islands]

Because of its recent political separation from Sweden, in 1905, a now independent Norway needed to build up its economy so, when it was obvious that there would be a war between the other European powers, they knew that they had to remain neutral in order to do so.

Its economy depended on agriculture and the supply of raw materials from abroad – such as coal from Britain. The Germans agreed to this neutrality and to the needs of the country, which is why, when the Battle of Lerwick, a convoy of Norwegian ships, escorted by British ships, took place there was so much condemnation of Germany.

The story of the Battle follows: -

On the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> October 1917, a westbound convoy of twelve merchant ships left Marsten, on the coast of Norway, bound for Shetland. Escorting the convoy were two armed trawlers, the HMS "Elise" and HMS "P Fannon" and two destroyers, HMS "Mary Rose" and HMS "Strongbow" (with Lieutenant-Commander Edward Brooke as her Captain).

Lieutenant Commander Brooke at a subsequent Court Martial, said that, during the night, he had tried to communicate with the "Mary Rose" but having got no reply, stationed the "Strongbow" on the port quarter of the convoy, which was spread to the north and north-west of his ship.

At 600 hours on the morning of Wednesday, 17<sup>th</sup> October, the convoy, positioned approximately 65 miles to the east of Lerwick, was intercepted by the two German mine-laying cruisers, the SMS "Bremse" and the SMS "Brummer", approaching the rear – both were rigged to look like British ships,

At the time, HMS "Strongbow" was just astern of the convoy with HMS "Mary Rose" about 7 miles in front of it. Visibility, at no more than 4000 yards, was very poor, and those on watch on HMS "Strongbow", also fooled by the rigging, mistook the German ships for British cruisers.

When they were noticed a signal was sent out asking them to identify themselves but there was no reply.. The challenge was sent several times more but no answer was received. The officer of the watch, Lieutenant James, suddenly realised that the unidentified ships were, in fact, German vessels and sent word below to call Lieutenant-Commander Brooke to the bridge and instructed that a wireless signal be sent out to warn the "Mary Rose" of the danger but the German cruisers had successfully jammed the signal, which they did with all similar efforts by the Allied ships.

By this time the SMS "Brummer" had closed within 3000 yards and opened fire on HMS "Strongbow" with devastating results. The main steam pipe and wireless of HMS Strongbow was knocked out, completely.

Lieutenant-Commander Brooke, up on the bridge, sent Lieutenant James, to the wireless office in an effort to try once again to send a message but he found it wrecked by shell fire and the operator killed.

He returned to the bridge but found that, too, wrecked by shell-fire; the captain was badly wounded and the quartermaster killed.

Lieutenant-Commander Brooke had been hit in the leg, by a shell splinter but he continued in command, not allowing anyone to attempt to leave the stricken ship until he was absolutely certain that every confidential book and paper had been destroyed, and that, in the event that the ship didn't sink, the enemy would not find anything of any use. Only, when he was satisfied that his orders had been carried out, did he order that the ship should be sunk, and abandoned. The ship sank at about 0930 hours with the loss of 47 Officers and men.

The German cruisers, then, turned their attention to the merchantmen and, in a short period of time, sank four of them.

Lieutenant-Commander Fox, the Captain of the "Mary Rose", having received no signal warning him of the German ships, and not seeing them because of the poor visibility, was unaware of what had happened to the "Strongbow" or the four merchantmen. When he heard firing astern of the ship he thought that the convoy was being attacked by a submarine so closed in to fight, totally unaware of the desperate odds that he and the ship would be up against. It was a while before he sighted the German cruisers and, then, realised the situation that confronted him

Without a moment's hesitation, however, knowing of the enemy's superior fire power and their greater range, he approached the enemy at high speed. At about twenty minutes past six, his guns opened fire at a distance, estimated to have been between 6,000 and 7,000 yards. He kept closing on the enemy, still firing, but at a distance of only 2,000 yards from the enemy, Lieutenant-Commander Fox put the helm hard over to turn away. As the "Mary Rose" was on the turn, however, the German gunners got the range.

The fire-power from their guns brought the end quickly – the "Mary Rose" sank in a very short time taking with her most of her compliment of eighty-eight Officers and ratings, including Lieutenant-Commander Fox, who was last seen swimming in the water just before the ship went down.

A few survivors, with one Officer, Sub Lt. Freeman, managed to escape on a raft. It was reported that the Germans subjected all the boats and rafts to an indiscriminate shelling whereby many persons lost their lives, although this was disputed in later reports.

The captain of the armed trawler "**Elise**" contrived to keep his ship out of the fire of the German cruisers, and returned to the scene of the disaster as soon as he could, where he picked up a number of survivors, amongst them Lieutenant-Commander Brooke and the party from the "Strongbow".

Sub-Lieutenant Freeman and the men from the "Mary Rose" reached the Norwegian coast, near Bergen, where the lighthouse keepers took them in, fed them, and attended to their injuries. Altogether about 250 lives were lost in this battle with only ten men from the "Mary Rose" and forty five from the "Strongbow" survived, including her Commanding Officer, Lt Cdr Brooke, who was to die of pneumonia some twelve months later.

In addition to the "Elise", the trawler "P. Fannon" and three other steamships managed to escape. Nine of the convoy ships perished. There were strong British forces at sea in the area but, as no word of the action was received until 1550 hours on the 17th., they were not in a position to intercept the "Bremse" and the "Brummer" and they returned to their home port in safety.

The event was regarded as an outrage by the Allies who protested that the attack on neutral ships was illegal (Norway being neutral at that time) and that the Germans gave the crews of the merchant vessels no time to evacuate, thus resulting in a large loss of civilian lives. Both of the British commanders received credit for bravery, though some members of the Admiralty felt that, by leaving the convoy to engage a superior enemy force, the merchant ships had been left wide open to attack.

Within a few days a Court Martial was set up to investigate what had happened and questions were raised in Parliament.

The following have been taken from Hansard and are reports on two the House of Commons debates.

#### **Debate 1 - 28th November 1917, concerning the "Destroyers Lost In North Sea".**

*Commander Bellairs asked (1) the date, time, and place of the court-martial to be held concerning the loss of the destroyers " Strongbow " and " Mary Rose " and the Norwegian convoy on 17th October; (2) the terms of reference of the courts-martial on the survivors of the destroyers " Strongbow " and " Mary Rose "?*

**Dr. Macnamara** *The court-martial to inquire into the loss of the "Mary Rose" will probably be held at Chatham at 10 a.m. on the 3rd December. The court-martial to inquire into the loss of the "Strongbow" has had to be postponed owing to the condition of the commanding officer. The Naval Discipline Act does not admit of a court-martial being held to inquire into the loss of the convoy, but the matter will arise at the courts-martial on the two destroyers. The order to the Court will in each case be in the customary form "to inquire into the cause of the loss of the ship and to try the surviving officers and crew."*

**General Sir Ivor Philipps** *Will it be a public Court?*

**Dr. Macnamara** *I cannot say. Power is taken, I think, under the "Amended Navy Discipline Act" to hear part or the whole of the case privately.*

**Commander Bellairs** *By what authority does the Admiralty act in not holding a public inquiry Is it by an Order in Council; if so, has it been laid upon the Table of the House, in accordance with the Naval Discipline Act?*

## **Debate 2 - 15th January 1918 concerning the Convoy Losses.**

*"Mr. Pringle asked the First Lord of the Admiralty whether he can state the findings in the inquiries into the losses of convoys in the North Sea? "*

*"Dr. Macnamara With regard to the attack which was made by the enemy on the Scandinavian convoy on the 12th December, 1917, when His Majesty's ship "Partridge" was sunk, I would refer my hon. Friend to the answer which my right hon. Friend the First Lord gave to the hon. and gallant Member for Maidstone yesterday."*

*"As regards the previous attack made by the enemy on the Scandinavian convoy on the 17th October, 1917, when His Majesty's ship "Mary Rose" and His Majesty's ship "Strongbow" were sunk, the position is as follows:—"*

*"A court-martial has been held to inquire into the loss of His Majesty's ship "Mary Rose," and the proceedings are now before the Board of Admiralty. The court-martial in the case of His Majesty's ship "Strongbow" was delayed in the hope that the commanding officer would be sufficiently recovered from his wounds to attend. As, however, he is still unable to attend, the court-martial has now been held, and the proceedings have just reached the Admiralty. Until they have been considered, I do not think it would be right to make any further statement, seeing that the two separate courts-martial are so intimately connected and that the evidence of the commanding officer, His Majesty's ship "Strongbow," has not yet been taken. When the proceedings have been considered by the Board in conjunction with the court-martial in the case of His Majesty's ship "Mary Rose," my right hon. Friend will see whether any further statement can be made. Meanwhile, my right hon. Friend wishes me to amplify what he said in his statement of the 1st November about the circumstances in which His Majesty's ship "Mary Rose" (the late Lieutenant-Commander Charles L. Fox, R.N., in command) was sunk. The conduct of her officers and crew were in accordance with the highest traditions of the Service, and they fought a very gallant action. "*

**Dr. Macnamara** *If my memory does not fail me, one of the War Emergency Acts amended the Naval Discipline Act by including a Section giving the President of the Court and the Admiralty power to hear all or part of a case in private.*