

“Bexhill Sailor’s Story of the Disaster”

“Desperate Struggle with Drowning Man”

An enthralling story of his experiences was told on Tuesday morning to a representative of the “Observer” by Mr. Reginald Burrige, Leading Stoker on the HMS “Hogue”, who, as stated last week, was one of the survivors of the Naval disaster in the North Sea when three cruisers were sunk by the German Submarines. Mr. Burrige, who arrived home on Sunday evening, lives at the Coastguard Station, and readily volunteered to tell what had happened to him on that tragic morning. Like all sailors he told his story simply and straightforwardly, in much the same manner that he would have done the most ordinary of experiences.

“The affair happened” he said “on the morning of the 22nd. I was on watch in the Engine Room at the time about 1.15 when a message came down that the “Aboukir” was sinking. It was thought that she had struck a mine. Nearly all hands were in their hammocks then, and they were ordered to turn out and go on deck and do what they could to save the crew of the “Aboukir” which was our sister ship. I was just about to go on deck, and had got to the bottom of the engine room ladder, when there was a tremendous crash in the middle of the engine room, not far from where I stood. I thought we had struck a mine. As soon as I heard the crash, I rushed on deck, and there I saw Captain Nicholson, who gave orders for all hands to get to the forecastle.

“Three Torpedoes in a Minute or Two”

“Just then another torpedo struck our vessel forward, we found out as soon as we got on deck that we had been first hit by a torpedo from a German submarine, and a minute or two later, another one struck us aft. This made three torpedoes in only a minute or two. The vessel at once commenced to heel over, and it was clear she would go down pretty quickly. Then Captain Nicholson gave the order ‘Every man for himself’ and we saw we had got to do the best we could under the circumstances. Orders were passed round for the men to roll up their hammocks lightly, as they will float for an hour or more. When this is done I rushed off the forecastle to see if I could get a hammock, but could not find one. I then went down to the starboard battery when I found the vessel had heeled over so much that the water was level with the gun ports. This was only about three minutes after having been struck. I found a seaman there trying to get overboard a target barrel with some rope attached to it. He asked me to help him launch it through the port but the port was nearly under water and we could not do it. Then a big wave washed in and I lost hold of the target barrel and I didn’t see it or the sailor, again. From there I ran on to the quarter deck, where I stood up to my knees in water looking for something to float with. The vessel was sinking fast then, and her funnels were only just above the water. I managed to get hold of a hammock and jumped with it into the water. As soon as I was there, a drowning man got hold of me, and we went under at once. We struggled, and after a time I managed to get clear of him, though I was nearly drowned before I did so, and he had torn my clothes half off me. I am a good swimmer and when I got away from him, I floated on my back for some time.

Very Nearly Gone

“I was not far from the “Creasy” at the time, and I could see that she had been torpedoed as well. She was firing at the submarines which were round her until she heeled quite over. We were left quite helpless, except for the boats which we had put over to save the men from the “Aboukir”. Eventually I got hold of a piece of wood and while I was holding it I trod on a man who was floating under the water and not quite drowned. I got a rare fright because I thought I was going to have another struggle like I had not long before. However, nothing happened but when I got a little further a German submarine passed close under me. That was another thing which upset me a great deal. I floated about for nearly an hour and got away from

everyone. I didn't see any signs of my being picked up by any of the boats which were rowing about a good way off and taking survivors to a Dutch fishing boat which had come up. As I was drifting away from them I thought I would chance it, so I left my piece of wood and swam to the picket boat which was nearest to me. The sea was pretty rough at the time, and I was very nearly gone when I got up to the boat. I couldn't get hold of the oar which one of the men held out for me and so somebody hitched a boathook in my belt and hauled me on board that way. The Dutch fishing boat came to my help and we were picked up, as well as the other men, who had not been drowned. It was difficult work owing to the heavy swell which was on at the time.

Destroyers to the Rescue

"Just about the same time a fleet of destroyers came up. They had got the wireless message which had been sent off directly our vessels were torpedoed. As soon as they came on the scene, they drove the submarines off and we got away in safety in the Dutch vessel. Had it not been for the destroyers coming up it is pretty certain that the submarines would have waited until all our sailors were picked up by the Dutchmen and then they would have torpedoed us again and sunk all hands. When we left the scene of the disaster, we sailed for Ymusden and got there the same evening. As soon as we landed we went to the Red Cross Hospital where we got the most kindly treatment. Dry boots and clothes were given us and some of those who had been rescued with nothing on at all were rigged out with fresh suits. We stopped there until the next morning and then went by train to a camp at a place I cannot remember. After that we had to walk about fifteen miles, and came in the evening to a depot called Intermeering, where we stopped. Dutch soldiers were put as guards over us and we understood that we should be kept as prisoners until the war is over. It turned out that Captain Nicholson had been saved, and he somehow managed to get let free and he went back to England. Then we heard that the Salvation Army were trying to get us released and two days later Captain Nicholson came back with news that we were to be released and were to go home almost at once. We left for England on the Saturday in the fishing boat and were escorted across by two destroyers. We landed at Sheerness and got a warm welcome from our flagship the "Baccharate" which had not sailed with us. We were treated handsomely and then given free railway fares and sent to our homes. I got home on Sunday night and very glad I was to think that I had escaped with my life out of so many dangers.

Waiting for a Smack at the Germans

Speaking further of the scenes on the "Hogue" when it was known that she was sinking, Mr. Burrige said there was no panic on the vessel at any time. "Everyone" he said, "seemed to take things quite calmly, and it was only when everybody was in the water and men were drowning that there was much excitement. The other two vessels which had been torpedoed were only hit once, but we were struck three times which accounted for us going down the quickest of the lot. Had it not been for that, a great many more would have had a chance, as a lot of them were down below in the engine room and at the furnaces and bunkers and had no time to get up on deck before the vessel sank. We had been patrolling about that particular spot for several days before the disaster happened and evidently these submarines had been laying in wait for us. It was a very smart piece of work on their part though I don't believe it was done by one or two submarines. I am certain there were several all around us when it happened. It was a horrible thing to have to go through" Mr. Burrige concluded "but it's one of the risks you have to put up with in war time. I've nearly got over it now and don't feel any ill effects at all. I shall be quite ready to go again when I'm called like many of our fellows who won't be satisfied until they have had a fair smack at the Germans".

NB: There were 837 survivors picked up from the sinking of the Hogue, Aboukir and Cressey but 1,459 men died.