

A Belated Burial – The Crew of HMS Glatton

Almost a century on from the Great War, we are often reminded that men have long been missing by the occasional report of yet another set of human remains having been discovered in France and Flanders. In 2008, for example, there was the discovery of burial pits containing 250 Australian and British soldiers at Fromelles, while in 2013, some 26 French *poilus* were recovered from the forest surrounding the *Village Detruit* of Fleury-devant-Douaumont. Royal Navy casualties, today recorded as missing, were mainly those lost at sea along with their ships which would become generally accepted as official war graves.

The overwhelming majority of British naval ship losses had resulted from enemy action in one form or another. This would have been through direct ship-to-ship engagements such as at the Battle of Jutland in 1916, or through a torpedo fired or a mine laid by a U-Boat. However, the wartime loss of the monitor, HMS Glatton, did not fit any of those scenarios, as the following statement of facts (with some minor editorial amendments), which were published on the 10th April, 1930 with the authority of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, informs us:

'At 17 minutes past 6 on the afternoon of 16th September, 1918, a serious explosion occurred amidships on board HMS Glatton in Dover Harbour, resulting in the deaths of 79 officers and men and the injury of 105 others.

The explosion was followed immediately by an outbreak of fire, the oil fuel burning furiously and spreading fore and aft. While the injured were being removed from the ship attempts were made to suppress the fire and flood the magazines. The foremost magazine was successfully flooded, but the after magazine could not be got at. For over an hour every effort was made to get the fire under [control], but as it had then reached the vicinity of the after magazine, and as all the injured had been removed, it was decided to sink the ship to avoid the disastrous consequences [to the ships in her vicinity] of an explosion in the after magazine. As the opening of such sea cocks as were available made little impression, the ship was torpedoed and sunk at 8 pm.'

What had prompted the publication of that statement more than eleven years after the sinking? A week earlier, on the 3rd April, the burial had taken place of the remains of an officer and 57 ratings, including that of Jerseyman 312415 Stoker Petty Officer Raphael Genée (who served as Gence), whose bodies had been recovered from the wreck of HMS Glatton and taken to Chatham's Naval Hospital a few weeks previously, as a result of ship-breaking operations.

There may have been some recent lurid or inaccurate reporting of the events that had taken place in 1918, but at least one paper, The Times, would carry an account of the funeral, and which has been refined and summarised below:

'The remains of the 58 sailors who sank with HMS Glatton in Dover Harbour in September 1918, were placed in a single grave in Gillingham Cemetery today having been brought from Chatham's Naval Hospital with full naval honours.

The weather that accompanied these belated rites was sufficiently comfortless for many to recall, to mind and body, the sensations of active service. The attendant rain was heavy throughout! From the time that the large coffin was lowered until the service was over, the group of naval officers who were present at the graveside had stood impassive and bare-headed, with their cocked hats held under their arms. The black oilskins of the firing party

shone and dripped as their owners stood with heads bowed, their bayonets fixed and rifles reversed. The gowns and vestments of the four Chaplains who conducted the service were wringing wet, while almost 100 relatives of the dead sailors, including the widow of Commander Drew, the sole officer being buried, were gathered under umbrellas, there being few other civilians who had come out to brave the weather. In all, the crowd was silent and sombre and the khaki greatcoats and white helmets of the Royal Marines offered little more than a subdued contrast to the indigo and black appearance of the others present. The firing party fired three volleys, which rattled damply, to mark the committal service's completion, and after buglers had sounded the Last Post, they presented arms in a final salute, before marching off in the direction from which they had come, lashed by the driving rain.

The survivors of the disaster were represented by Commander Neston Diggle who had been HMS Glatton's captain at the time.

The Royal Navy mourners were:

- Admiral Sir Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair, C-in-C, The Nore*
- Commander J Brooke, representing Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, C-in-C, Portsmouth*
- Rear-Admiral AJB Stirling, Admiral Superintendent, Chatham Dockyard*
- Commodore AL Snagge*
- Lieutenant-Colonel HB Inman, RM, representing FH Griffiths, Colonel-Commandant, Chatham Division*
- Captain LE Holland, representing Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, C-in-C, Atlantic Fleet*
- Captain DB Le Mottée, Chief of Staff, The Nore*

Sailors from the Royal Naval Barracks at Chatham had hauled the gun carriage bearing the single coffin covered with the Union Jack, and it was accompanied by a procession of 300 officers and men, with detachments having been provided by the Royal Marine Barracks, the Atlantic Fleet and the Reserve Fleet, Chatham.

The service was conducted by the Reverend A Shell, RN, and the Reverend HV Kemp, RN took the committal for those of the dead who were members of the Church of England. Father Jones, RN took the service for the Roman Catholics. Prayers for the Non-Conformists were said by the Reverend Arthur Haig, RN.

The Times also observed that:

It was at dusk on the 16th September, 1918 that the town of Dover was shaken by a tremendous explosion, and from there, crowds soon flocked to the sea front, from where the could see the Glatton furiously burning. Other explosions followed, and a few hours later it was sunk by torpedoes fired from a destroyer as it was thought that the fires would reach the ship's magazines, posing a serious risk to other naval vessels, including a munitions ship, all carrying explosives. The order to undertake this had been given by Acting Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes who had been in command of the Dover Patrol at the time of the disaster. Before such a painful order had been implemented however, it was ensured that all of the injured were removed by a small collection of pinnaces and tug-boats.

The ship was a monitor, and with her sister ship HMS Gorgon, had originally been laid down for the Royal Norwegian Navy in 1913 and launched 1914. She was not commissioned until 1918 and was thus considered to have been a new ship. She had a complement of 305 men.

As to the cause of the disaster, the Admiralty statement of the 10th April, 1930 gave no indication, although the Times, a week previously, had reported that:

The cause of the disaster was never established, and it was not until after the Armistice that the public learned more than the bare fact that a monitor had been lost with some 50 lives.

However, there is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that the cause of HMS Glatton's loss was due to poor workmanship at the shipbuilder's yard. Cork lagging, that was to be fitted to the bulkhead separating the boiler room from the mid-ship magazine, was found to be missing on board HMS Gorgon and the resultant gap was filled by newspapers. Furthermore, 0.5" rivets had not been fitted and the open holes could have allowed the passage of gases, fumes and the odd spark into the magazine.

Although the burial on the 3rd April, 1930 was of the remains of 58 sailors, a further 21 men were also lost, and these were men who sadly died of their injuries following their rescue.

As to HMS Glatton itself, the ship was largely broken up, but some of the remnants were then moved to so that it would no longer continue to be a shipping hazard. These remnants were eventually built over, and today lie under Dover's Cross-Channel Ferry Terminal, a sobering fact that is unknown to the many tens of thousands who undertake the crossing between France and England every year.

BHB

15th October, 2013

