

Great Oaks From Little Acorns Grow

Marilyn Stephenson-Knight

WHO was Coulson Crascall? And who was Harry Terry? And what do they have in common?

Questions like these are exactly what an exciting new initiative for Dover will answer. Under the auspices of the Town Council I have the honour to be the academic researcher for the Dover War Memorial Project. It aims to discover the full names, the families, and the histories behind every person named on the memorial that stands outside the Dover Town Council offices at Maison Dieu House. Fittingly, the project was born on Remembrance Sunday last year, the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the ending of World War II. While we stood in reverent silence by the memorial, remembering those who had given so much for all of us, there were two men in particular of whom I thought. Both are named on the memorial, both were my great uncles, and one was Coulson Crascall.



Dover's war memorial outside of Maison Dieu House

Therein lies the first answer. Coulson Crascall and Harry Terry were both Doverians and both of them died in the Great War, World War I. Their names are preserved by the memorial, and we honour them and millions of others every November. The Dover War Memorial Project will continue this, publishing in an accessible form as much information as possible about our local heroes. The intention is to try to understand who they were and what they did - and how they lost their lives. In other words the project seeks to find and to know, as far as is possible, the person who bore the name.

The benefits of this are many. Not only does it help us to remember them - and underline the meaning and the enormity of the loss - but this project will also help educate our new generations about the sacrifices made by their forebears. It will give them an insight into the personal costs of war, it will enable them to relate important events in history to local knowledge, and in many cases it will reveal what their own relatives did, thus giving them an introduction to social and family history too. That is not all, for the Dover War Memorial Project is a community project. There is great enthusiasm and interest, there are many offers of help, and several people have already brought in to the Town Council offices items relating to their relatives, including an official yet most kindly letter announcing a death and some photographs, along with much useful information. This is a resource which everyone may use and to which everyone may contribute, including schoolchildren who may participate in research.

Can the Dover War Memorial Project tell us more about what Coulson Crascall and Harry Terry have in common? Indeed it can, for research reveals that both their

fathers were born in Dover and they even had the same name - Henry. Their sons, Coulson and Harry, are described as having brown hair and fresh complexions, both were married, and both of them, with records of 'very good' conduct, were seamen. They had tattoos on their left arms, but only Harry had a nautical one, having chosen an anchor. Though Harry was three years older than Coulson, having been born in 1875, they probably knew each other, for they came from the same area of Dover (Coulson lived in Military Road and Harry just off Biggin Street) and several times served on the same vessels, the Pembroke and the Wildfire, though not always at the same time. They also both served on the H.M.S. Cressy. This was to be their last voyage, for here, not long after the war began, both of them died. The cause of their deaths on 22nd September 1914 is given as 'killed in action with submarine in North Sea'.

Other records offer more information about what happened. Coulson is described as 'drowned' and Harry as 'lost' in the North Sea when Cressy was sunk by a German submarine. The submarine was Unterseeboot U-9, commanded by Lieutenant Otto Weddigen, who just a month before had married his childhood love. At around 7.15am he fired three torpedoes at the Cressy. One missed, and one, of which the crew plainly saw the trail as it approached them, struck her on the starboard side. Cressy began to list but remained steady for the crew had already closed the watertight doors and scuttles. It was the third torpedo that was fatal. It hit a boiler room, the boiler exploded, and within just 25 minutes 'in a cloud of dense black smoke' the Cressy had turned over and sunk.

Lieutenant Weddigen stated that the men of the Cressy were 'brave and true to their country's sea traditions'. They remained as long as they could by their guns, seeking the U-boat and even attempting to run it down. But they were

unable to damage it. Just how brave they were is shown by what else had already happened that morning. The Cressy was the last of three armoured cruisers lost within an hour. The crew had already witnessed the sinking of H.M.S. Aboukir. She was struck by torpedo at 6.25am under one of her magazines. This then exploded, hurling part of the vessel into the air. As the Cressy and the third ship, HMS Hogue, lowered boats to help survivors, the Hogue too was struck by two torpedoes. Her engine room flooded and she sank within twenty minutes. Captain Johnson of the Cressy ordered the crew to begin zigzagging as a defence, trying at the same time to manoeuvre close enough to assist the crews from the Aboukir and Hogue. Even before Cressy was struck her crew had thrown overboard all their loose timber to provide support for the men in the water. But the zigzagging failed. Survivors from the Cressy described how their fate was inevitable, for they had seen the third and fatal torpedo aimed at them passing directly over the upturned hull of the sinking Aboukir.

Otto Weddigen states that before he attacked he passed by several British ships, including torpedo boats, for he was seeking 'bigger game'. He is described as hardly able to believe his luck when he espied, as he says, the 'grey-black sides' of the cruisers 'riding high over the water'. The three vessels formed a triangle and he positioned U-9 in the centre, thus enabling the submarine to strike any one. But why was he so easily able to do this, and to carry out such a successful attack?

The three cruisers, Aboukir, Hogue, and Cressy, were of an old design, much slower than newer battleships. Even before the war the decision had been made that they were no longer to be maintained and once faults became serious they were to be scrapped. Many from their crews were young and inexperienced, and they were without their normal hierarchy of command for

two Rear Admirals were absent. Despite advice to the contrary, the Admiralty commanded the cruisers to patrol an area off the coast of Holland in order to help keep approaches to the English Channel clear of German mine-layers and torpedo boats. Operating without destroyer support owing to adverse weather conditions, so great was the vulnerability of the cruisers that they were known as the 'Live-Bait Squadron'. Having enticed U-9, their own actions compounded their danger for they ordinarily travelled without zigzagging - which Otto Weddigen himself stated had rendered Cressy more difficult to hit - and Hogue and Cressy, rather than calling for destroyers and removing themselves, had stopped their engines in order to help the crew of the Aboukir. At the later enquiry in to the loss of the vessels, all their senior officers were censured.

One who came in for particular criticism was the absent Rear Admiral Campbell who was in overall command of Cruiser Force C, as the patrol was known. He was accused of 'a very poor performance' at the enquiry, for he maintained he did not know the purpose of his command. While this may seem an incredible admission, it nevertheless provides a further perspective. World War I was like no other - the period has become known as 'the birth of total war'. The Great War was the offspring of the industrial revolution and a key moment for the power of the modern state in terms of mass mobilisation, industrial logistical warfare, and the formation of patriotic identity. But at the same time it retained vestiges of previous eras, for on the battlefields contemporary technology and infrastructure were frequently unable to provide swift communication and transport, and so armies often moved by foot and depended on messengers. Along with the soon-shattered belief in 1914 that the war would be finished by Christmas, this provided a sense that new tactics for this different époque needed to be

developed, learnt, and employed. This perhaps is what lies behind Rear Admiral Campbell's statement. They were learning on the job.

In 1914 the submarine as a combatant was given little importance or credence, for it was assumed that war at sea would be between battleships. There was much less awareness of danger from beneath the waves, and in those first days of the war many vessels customarily did not zigzag. Moreover, the cruisers were looking out for ships, not submarines, and thus when the Aboukir exploded Captain Drummond believed they had struck a mine. He signalled the other two vessels to his aid. It was only when the Hogue was torpedoed that the danger was understood. Even then there was confusion, for Bertram Nicholson, Commander of the Cressy, believed there was more than one submarine, and Lieutenant Weddigen states that the Cressy was firing wildly, hoping to hit a target, but that only one shot came 'unpleasantly near'.

Great oaks from little acorns grow. What this research for the Dover War Memorial Project demonstrates is how initially following the story of one man, Coulson Craswell, provides an entry to greater and further knowledge, in this case into the very nature of the Great War itself and how it may be understood. But again, it does not end there! At the same time the project illustrates how vast events may have local impacts. Left behind when Harry and Coulson died were two widows and grieving families and dependants. But they were not the only ones. On our memorial is another seaman lost with the Cressy. Allan Loram was a stoker, and he left behind his parents, Jesse and Mary Ann, when he was killed at the age of 37.

This is where the Dover War Memorial Project produces surprises. For research has shown that, although he is not named on the memorial, there was a fourth Cressy victim from Dover. His name was William Epps and he was 47 when he died. His father was a Dovorian, and his wife

Margaret lived just along the coast at Sandgate. Very probably he knew Allan Loram, for William was a Petty Officer Stoker. Perhaps they were both working where the U-9's third torpedo struck.

There were also Dover victims from the Aboukir. Six are named on the memorial: Sydney Claw, Edward Everall, William Fairweather, John Fennel, Benjamin Franklin, and Horace Fry. Two more, George Holder and Maurice Woods, who are not on the memorial, have also been found. All of them left parents, and most left widows for only Edward and William were not married. Despite several ships and little vessels, alerted by wireless, rushing to help the men from the three cruisers, over 1,400 lost their lives that morning. We now know that twelve were Dovorians. But could there be any more victims from our town? Were there any Dovorians on the Hogue? And were there any Dovorians who survived? These are just three of the many questions the Dover War Memorial Project is trying to answer.

There is one other question that can be answered here. The twelve men all died on the same day, they all died in the same action, and they all were Dovorians. But what else do they have in common? The answer is that as seamen registered at Chatham, they are all commemorated on the large Naval Memorial there. For, lost at sea, they have no known grave.

And yet ... perhaps they have. Twenty five miles off the Dutch coast, in a hundred feet of water, lie the wrecks of the Cressy, the Aboukir, and the Hogue. Technology has advanced, and just over eighty years after they foundered divers began to visit them. They are sunk into a soft sandy mud, so close together that it is uncertain which cruiser is which. The remains of bridges and gun stations can still be seen, along with a gaping area of damage on one of the vessels - probably the result of the torpedo attack. But their condition is poor, and one of the divers believes that within another eighty years the remains will be virtually gone.

That is why memorials are so important. As the years go on, reminders and memories become fewer and fade. At the start of World War I there were senior officers at the Admiralty who tried to save the crews of the Cressy, Aboukir, and Hogue. Even they may not have completely appreciated the threat of the submarine, for they argued that the cruisers were vulnerable to modern surface ships. But one of those officers doubtless could have done, for he was Commodore of Submarines from 1910 to 1914 and had used British submarines at the battle of Heligoland Bight, less than a month before Cruiser Force C was torpedoed. He too is one of our local heroes. He is buried in St James's cemetery, and in April Dover Town Council will be commemorating the action for which he gained fame, and which formed part of his title when he became a peer. Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, Baron Keyes of Zeebrugge and Dover, opposed the sending of the 'Live-Bait Squadron' to the Broad Fourteens off Holland. Perhaps it is appropriate then that the memorial he unveiled in 1924 preserved some of the names of the men he sought to save. It is this work that the Dover War Memorial Project will continue, honouring those we lost by remembering them and by enabling those who come after to discover and learn about them.

To be continued.



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