

FRIENDLY FIRE

The sinking of the British Submarine, HMS J6 by the Q-ship HMS Cymric on 15th October 1918, outside Blyth

By Captain G J G Francis MN (Rtd)

The following Government report was published in 1919 under the title "Submarine Losses 1904 to present day".

Sunk in error off Blyth by Q Ship HMS Cymric.

"On 15th October 1918 HMS J6 was lying on the surface outside Blyth. The Q-ship Cymric was also in the area. At 1600 a submarine was spotted closing to have what the Cymric thought was a good look before attacking. The Cymric at once went to action stations believing the submarine to be the German U-boat U6. As shells poured into the submarine the signalman attempting to hoist a recognition signal was killed. J6 attempted to lose the Q-ship by entering a fog bank. Cymric followed and found the submarine settling in the water. It was only when survivors were picked up that the mistake became clear."

It followed that a careful enquiry into the loss of H.M. Submarine J6 on the 15th October 1918 at about 1540 was held on board the submarine's Blyth based mother ship HMS Titania on the 16th October 1918 by the Captain (S) Blyth, Captain HMS Vulcan and Commander H.M. Submarine M1.

This report was submitted to the Senior Naval Officer H.M. Naval. Granton Naval Base and the Secretary of the Admiralty, Whitehall, SW1. A communication dated the 19th January 1919 giving a decision

was sent to Lieutenant Frederick H Peterson. All papers were stamped PRIVATE in bold red letters.

The following small obituary concerning Dovorian Ellis Charles Adams appeared in the Daily Telegraph on the 29th March 1984. "E C Adams, who has died at Dover aged 84, was a survivor of a naval disaster of the 1914-1918 War. When the submarine HMS J6 was sunk by fire from the Q-ship Cymric. Only 29 of the crew of 45 survived. The mistake occurred on October 15th 1918 when the J6 was carrying out a surface patrol in poor visibility. The Cymric, on patrol nearby, on sighting the submarine mistook the letter 'J' on the conning tower for a "U" and opened fire. Since the disaster no British submarine has carried the letter "J".

I knew Mr Adams, the father of my wife Mary, for 25 years and as he had spent a lifetime in the Royal Navy covering two world wars and I was then completing my career of fifty years connected with the Merchant Navy we had a great deal in common to discuss.

On the few occasions that any mention was made by Mr Adams of his war service, he would remember having served on the submarine M I that had possessed a 14-inch gun. Occasionally he would mention the disaster when the submarine that he was serving on as a



Ellis Charles Adams

telegraphist, HMS J6, was sunk by friendly fire by the Special Services topsail barquentine HMS Cymric, approximately fifty mile off the North East coast.

He recounted that prior to leaving the harbour on that fateful day to commence a ten-day patrol off the Dogger Bank in the North Sea, hoisting a large White Ensign size 4 breath to the top of the 40 foot wireless mast before taking his departure station in the motor room. When, following instructions from the bridge telegraph, he altered the motor switches which controlled a series of locking arms that had to be pushed home. There was a giant rheostat for speeding up and an equally giant switch for reversing. This responsibility ensured the smooth movements of the engine

whilst the Captain manoeuvred the submarine from the harbour jetty and out of the harbour.

Clearing Blyth harbour at 1200, HMS J6 proceeded at fifteen knots out into the North Sea when the Captain handed over the bridge control to Sub-Lieutenant Brierly. Also on the bridge were two lookouts and a signalmann, the latter with a rifle at the ready to fire a coloured signal grenade in reply when challenged by a surface vessel firing their signal grenade first to a submarine, as required by H. M. Regulations.

At 1520 the starboard lookout reported a sailing ship ahead without an ensign at about 1500 yards, as HMS J6 drew away from the sailing ship, which had turned out to be the British Q-ship HMS Cymric. Without challenging the submarine with a coloured grenade it dropped its hinged bulwarks and opened fire with its 4" howitzer and two 12 pounders. Obtaining direct hits on the conning tower, injuring Sub-Lieutenant Briely and knocking the rifle out of the signalmann's hands, another shell punched the waterline and further shells exploded in the control room. As the stricken submarine increased its distance to over 4000 yards and about to enter a fog bank HMS Cymric started up its auxiliary engines in order to chase the submarine while continuing to pound it into oblivion.

Meanwhile, down below Adams joined others including the Captain to try to stem the flooding, when this failed they hurriedly abandoned the compartment and shut the watertight doors. Salt water had entered the batteries and chlorine gas was seeping into the room. Electric circuits shorted and smouldered into flame and there was a serious of minor

but frightening explosions. To make matters worse, the boat was in complete darkness and the crew were knee-deep in water. The level of carbon dioxide built up more rapidly than expected and by the time it was decided to pump out the flooded bow compartments most of the officers and men were too befuddled to think coherently.

There was no time, or need, for an order to abandon ship the submarine sank within minutes. The Captain led the remaining crew into the engine room where the after escape-hatch was situated and the crew managed to climb out onto the submarines side. There the captain instructed Lieutenant Robbins RNR to get the hands fallen in on the disengaged side and to take off his white shirt and wave it.

Adams sucked down beneath the sea tried to swim upwards. There was then a sudden surge beneath him, which shot him to the surface like a cork, he turned and 100 yards away he could see the bow of the J6 vertical in the sea. Somehow the berthron collapsible boat had been removed from the submarine and with other survivor's he swam over and they hauled themselves on board. The sea was littered with dead bodies some, wounded from shellfire, clinging to woodwork while those living were close to death from hypothermia or wounds.

One of the last to be seen alive was Sub-Lieutenant Briery who had been the Officer of the Watch during the moment the Cymric had opened fire, while attempting to swim towards some woodwork he was seen by Adams to wave and then disappeared. At this moment the Cymric, arrived out of the mist onto the scene to discover the

carnage they had caused was in fact to one of their own Royal Naval submarines.

Upon the completion of collecting the survivors and bodies from the sea, the Captain of HMS Cymric reported to the Captain (S) Blyth the destruction of HMS J6 with the loss of sixteen lives and was returning to the submarine base.

Whilst on passage to Blyth, Adams, together with all the other survivors questioned themselves how the Cymric had arrived at the decision to open fire on their submarine without establishing its identity, the J6 being in full buoyancy, men on the conning tower, mast up, White Ensign flying, gun unmanned and not acting in any way suspiciously.

Over the days and years that followed the survivors of the J6 would never come to learn the full final out-come of the enquiry in their lifetime. All reports were marked SECRET, such as the following examples that have been recently released.

The following day in the Courts the Commanding Officer of the Cymric was to defend his action to fire on HMS J6 because he "mistook the submarine for U6 and formed the opinion that at a distance of 1500 yards that she was German." The Courts however suggested that as HMS Cymric had visited the base of the J Class submarines the previous month in Blyth and had been provided with the silhouettes of the J Class submarines the previous June and September, that Lieutenant Peterson should have recognised the shape of the J Class submarine. Further to that the German submarine U6 of the Flanders Flotilla had run aground on the Dutch

coast in thick fog on the 12th March 1917 and had been arrested by the Netherlands Government.

The Court also pointed out that the circumstance that apparently decided Lieutenant Peterson to open fire was the sighting of the number, it should have been well known to him that all British submarines have their numbers painted in bold black letters on their conning towers. As far as is known this practice was not altered during the war or since. More information indicates that enemy submarines never show their number outside the boat, this shows in all photos of German submarines issued for I.D. Further the J Class submarine is 275 feet long with a 4" gun on a revolving platform forward and as high as the conning tower and the German U 6 was only 166 feet long with one 4 pounder on the upper deck.

An interesting statement at the Court of Inquiry was made when the following member: - Captain Elam James Taylor, skipper of the Cymric was called and cautioned.

Q "Are you the Sailing Master of Cymric? If so state what you saw of Submarine J6."

A "Yes sir, when I saw the submarine first it was abreast of the fore rigging on the starboard bow. When it got abreast of the wheelhouse I heard an officer say it's a U-boat and

give the order to fire. I then stood by the engine telegraphs."

Q. "Was the submarine flying a flag at her masthead and could you make out what it was?"

A. "Yes Sir, I made it out to be a White Ensign."

Q. "Was this before guns opened fire or afterwards?"

A. "Before Sir."

Q. "Did you tell anyone of your opinion?"

A. "No sir."

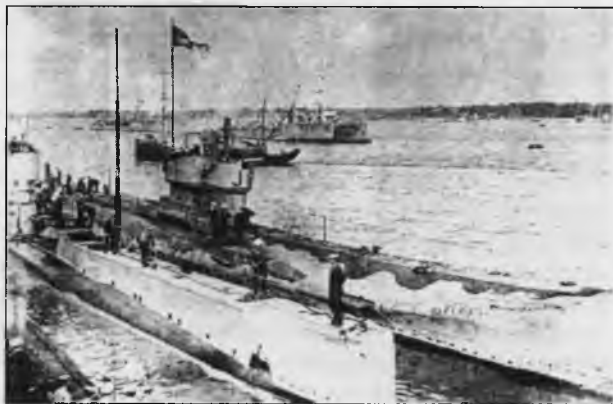
Q. "Did you see any smoke signals?"

A. I saw some black puffs but did not know what they were sir."

Witness then withdrew.



Submarine J5



Submarine J6

How did a teenage boy from the depths of Kent find himself on a submarine in the middle of the North Sea in one of the navy's most tragic incidences of the war involving serious life-threatening circumstances?

We must start on the 25th September 1899, Ellis Charles Adams was born in Tunbridge Wells into a family of market gardeners. Young Charles was educated locally and according to custom left school at the age of fourteen to make his way in the world. He applied to the Post Office and passed the physical examination, the written tests in arithmetic, geography and where-abouts of the area to become a Boy Telegraph Messenger.

Telegrams were delivered on foot and by bike in the days before telephones were widespread and a telegram was the only way of getting a message to someone on the same day. Each day Adams signed on duty and the first message could be for a very rough neighbourhood, while he waited at the door crowds of squalid children would crowd around him. Another time it could be to a rather prosperous merchant, who would give him two-pence and wish him good morning, thus from poor to rich. The daily life of a messenger could be one official monotonous duty if it was not for the different sights that one had contact with in the course of the day. At the Post Office base a kitchen was supplied for the boys throughout the day over which an overseer presides.

Then there was the little known weekly rifle drill that the boys had to be trained in. When a dignitary visited a platoon of boys would turn out on parade in front of

the head Post Office building to be inspected by, possibly by royalty or a military high official.

Early in 1916, aged sixteen and a half Charles volunteered to join the Royal Navy in the middle of a world war of hitherto unparalleled destruction. On the 23rd May he reported to the shore establishment, HMS Vivid in Devonport with the rank of Boy 2nd Class Seaman to complete fourteen weeks of seamanship on sixpence a day. Time at this barracks included assessments and selection board tests to assist in measuring leadership and intelligence.

The accommodation blocks were long rooms in which hammocks were slung in four rows and when seen with the men sitting at mess-tables in the room had the appearance of the deck of an old-fashioned line-of-battle-ship. There were electric lights, lavatories on each floor and water taps in each room. On the ground floors were capacious rooms for dining, smoking and billiards. Boy 2nd Class Adams shared this accommodation with four thousand other sailors.

Adams proved to be of above average intelligence by being selected to go to the Royal Naval wireless school HMS Ganges at Shotley on the 9th September. On the 1st November 1916 he was promoted to boy-telegraphist and began serious training in receiving and transmitting wireless signals, the decoding and coding of letters and cipher codes. His training included operating the Fessenden underwater sound-signalling apparatus, listening on hydrophones for sound waves, from ships in his vicinity, raising and lowering the telescopic radio mast on the bridge and learning valve reception and Poulson arc transmission.

Sometime during this period Adams decided that he wanted to join the submarine service, or boats as they are referred to by submariners. Whether it was the prospects of the excitement or bonus payments is not known but on 15th April 1917 he was posted to HMS Dolphin, the submarine base and school at Fort Blockhouse, on the Gosport side of Portsmouth harbour, for submarine training. He found it an exclusive service as only submarine ratings were allowed in a submarine and they got more pay after passing a very stiff medical examination. One's character had to be perfect to get in and discipline was quite comfortable. The officers and men mixed easily although there was a ruthlessness towards any sort of incompetence or slackness in the performance of duty and a warm hearted and very real fraternity resulted amongst all ranks and ratings.

While in port submarine crews slept in the parent ship and worked in the boat, which had no cooking or sleeping arrangements by day. When on passage or during exercises the crew members dossed down where they could find a billet and subsisted on tinned food. These handicaps as well as primitive sanitary arrangements and strictly rationed fresh water did little to offset the youthful enthusiasm and early responsibility that infused the branch.

Throughout the war, to enable submarines on patrol to keep in touch, three depot ships on the East Coast, the HMS Maidstone at Harwich, the HMS Titania at Blyth, and the HMS Lucia at Middleburgh used to transmit to each other at ten minutes past each hour and submarines would intercept. To enable radio traffic to be maintained at an even

volume, if no messages were to be sent, dummy signals were transmitted in four letter code or five-figure cipher. Reference would then be made to a codebook this had eight ounces of lead in the cover, so that in an emergency, the book could be dumped into the sea and kept out of enemy hands.

Each of these ships would also be a mother ship to the submarine crew who lived on board when in port. If the officers took all the accommodation, on HMS Titania for example, then the rest of the crew lived in the old herring-drying sheds near the main gate. The crew would tell the coxswain where they had slung their hammocks, so that he could call them, if required to put to sea at night.

On the 5th June 1917, Adams was ordered to report on board HMS Titania at Blyth the following day and to be available for duty to join the submarine HMS J6 at the first opportunity. HMS Titania was a merchant ship of 5250 tons being built in England for the Austrians when war broke out. She was commandeered and converted for use as a submarine parent ship and was appointed as depot ship to the 9th and 10th submarine flotillas which included J1 to J6.

The British J Class Submarines were built under an emergency war program, seven J Class were ordered and six built. They were unique to British submarines being designed with a triple screw making them the fastest of their time with a surface speed of 19 knots. Equipped with a powerful long-range wireless they were ideally suited to reconnoitre in enemy water. The J6 had been built in Pembroke Dock in 1916.

On the 25th September 1917 Adams was promoted to Ordinary Telegraphist and signed into the Royal Navy for twelve years.

On that fateful day of October 15th following the departure of HMS J6 no one on board would have realized that within four hours the patrol was to end in tragedy with loss of life, injury and the sinking of the submarine. Only recently the secret papers covering the findings of the Court together with the final decision by the Commander-in-Chief, East Coast of Scotland have been released.

Conclusions of the Court of Enquiry

It could be reasoned that men worn out and exhausted by the rigours of extended patrols, under war conditions are prone to mistakes insignificant in detail and trivial in extent, but for a Special Services Captain almost invariably fatal. However, security and the safeguarding of moral often demand the concealment of accident details and this was shown at the Court of Enquiry held on board HMS Titania on the 16th October 1918.

I. As Lieutenant Fredrick Henry Peterson, DSO and bar, DSC and bar RNR Commanding Officer, H.M. Special Service Vessel Cymric left the Court after giving evidence, the submarine men came to attention and saluted this officer.

2. Ref 2903/H.F.0022. Date 25th October 1918. SECRET.

Subject. Circumstances attending the sinking of the submarine J6 by Special Services Ship CYMRIC on 15th Oct. 1918. "It is considered that this regrettable accident was due to over-zeal on the part

of Commanding Officer of Cymric; he should have recognised the friendly character of J6. At the same time the Officer of the Watch of J6 who was unfortunately lost, appears to have approached Cymric unduly close and to have been somewhat over confident."

"It is not proposed to submit that Lieutenant Peterson, Captain of the Cymric, be tried by Court-Martial; this Officer has done excellent service and the fact that Officers and Men of HM Service have lost their lives through his action is sufficient punishment. No useful object will be achieved in pursuing this matter further." Commander-in-Chief 25 Oct. 1918 East Coast of Scotland.

Following the sinking of the submarine J6, of the original crew of 45, there were 16 casualties. 12 ranks and ratings attended the Court of Enquiry of whom 10 were fit to be called and cautioned prior to being questioned.

The remaining crew including Adams were taken immediately to hospital upon the arrival of HMS Cymric at Blyth, where Adams eventually made a full recovery and reported back at HMS Dolphin on the 30th January 1919 to continue his career on HM Submarines.

On November 21st 1918, there remained one wartime duty for many British submarines when the might of the Imperial German Navy steamed to surrender. Behind it, as a precaution against any trickery on the part of the German ships, there patrolled British submarines.

